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THE POETRY OF
GUY BUTLER

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INTRODUCTION

CHRONOLOGY

This study of Butler's poetry proceeds chronologically in accordance with the dates of composition of his poems. The first task has, therefore, been the compilation of a chronology of his poems.

Butler rarely dates his poems; nor does he keep a diary. Yet there are several criteria which make sensible dating of his poems possible. The first is the date of publication of individual poems. Many of the poems which appear in one or more of the five collections were published earlier in army magazines, student newspapers, and the like. A work which can be traced back to one of these early sources may be assumed to have been written fairly soon before its date of publication.

Another criterion is subject. It is possible to discern periods in the poet's career in relation to the subjects of his poems. The most obvious example is the War Period. Allied to subject is the criterion of theme. To use the War Period again, poems written during or immediately after the war years all treat the theme of man's dehumanisation. Both subject and theme are linked with biography. It is often possible to ascertain Butler's location from details in the poem; knowledge of his movements thus enables one to date such a poem.

Butler's style is the most significant criterion. This study is based on the observation that his style develops as time passes. The Butler of the Sixties is different from the Butler of the Fifties as far as style of writing is concerned. A poem which defies dating on all other grounds cannot escape this ultimate test.

Each of these criteria - date of publication, subject matter and theme linked to biography, and style - has limited reliability as a guide to dating the poems. But combined they are a meaningful instrument to assist in the structuring of a chronology whose most valuable source was the poet himself who was kind enough to search his memory for dates.

The fact that Butler rewrote or revised a number of his poems several times does of course raise the question: Is the first version merely a stage in the development of the poem, or a poem in its own right? This study is based on the opinion that a poem is a poem, regardless of the number of versions which precede or follow it, provided it is a complete statement. Each version should, in fact, be regarded as

representative of the poet's thoughts, feelings, and skills at the time he wrote it, and is independent of subsequent versions.

For the purposes of this chronology, poems have been placed at the time of the experience from which they grew. This thesis does, however, take cognizance of the changes in style or theme later versions may reveal.

No Date

1 1938 PROSPECT

The Nusas Anthology of Student Poetry, (Cape Town, 1946), p 16, signed 'F.G.B.Rhodes'. The first seven poems in this list were written in 1938 and 1939 while Butler was a student at Rhodes University, Grahamstown.

2 1939 POEM

3 COAL

4 SERVANT GIRL

Three poems which appeared in Vandag, (December,1946), pp 10-11. These are clearly pre-war poems: there is no hint of any disruptive force or unnatural conflict. 'Servant Girl' was later revised and re-published in South African Poetry: A New Anthology, compiled by Roy Macnab and Charles Gulston, (London,Collins, 1948), and in Theoria, (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal,1952), p 49. The poem reached its final form in the same year when it was published in Stranger to Europe,(Cape Town, Balkema, 1952). It has since appeared in Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems,(Cape Town, Balkema, 1960), and in Selected Poems, (Johannesburg, Donker, 1975).

5 THE END OF AN AFFAIR

Songs and Ballads, The Mantis Poets, (Cape Town, David Philip, 1978). The poem reached its final form forty years after its birth in December 1939.

6 KARROO TOWN 1939

Stranger to Europe, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems, and Selected Poems. This is one of the few dated poems. The poem explores the conflict between home

and war, a theme which recurs in many subsequent poems.

7 THE LAST TREKKER

Standpunte 5(1), (1950) pp 21-22; The Outspan, (November 14, 1952), p35; Stranger to Europe, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems, and Selected Poems. This is clearly a pre-war poem, and yet more akin to Butler's war poetry than to earlier verse. But for one or two exceptions, the thirty-one poems that follow date from the war years, 1940 - 1946. Butler served with the South African Forces, in the 6th Armoured Division in Syria, Egypt, Lybia, Italy, and the United Kingdom.

8 1940 COMMON DAWN

9 1942 BOMB CASUALTY

Both poems appeared in Vandag, (November, 1946, pp 27 - 28, 'Common Dawn' under the title, 'The Common Dawn'. 'Common Dawn' was written in South Africa at Bronkhorstspruit, and 'Bomb Casualty' in Syria. 'Common Dawn' was first published as 'Sentry' in The Outspan, (June 5 1942), p31, and in South African Poetry: A New Anthology in 1948. In 1958 it appeared in Poets in South Africa: An Anthology, edited by Roy Macnab, (Cape Town, Maskew Miller, 1958), under the title 'Common Dawn'. It was again anthologised in The Penguin Book of South African Verse edited by Jack Cope and Uys Krige, (London, Penguin, 1968). Both 'Common Dawn' and 'Bomb Casualty' appeared in Stranger to Europe, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems, and Selected Poems.

10 1943 SYRIAN SPRING

Oxford Poetry, (Oxford, 1946), pp 7 - 8; The Oxford Viewpoint, (Oxford, 1947), pp 13 - 15; Oxford Poetry (1947), pp 14 - 15; and South African Poetry: A New Anthology (1948). The poem was re-published in Stranger to Europe, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems, and Selected Poems.

11 FRAGMENT

The T.G.Digest, (Pretoria, March/April 1944); the first of three war poems written in Egypt.

12 THE COLOSSI OF MEMNON
The Sable, (May, 1945), p 45.

13 EL KAHIRA
The Sable, (August 1943), p2.

14 TOBRUK VISITED, DECEMBER 1943
Stranger to Europe, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems.

15 1944 MIRAGE
Vandag, (November, 1946), p28, as 'Bivvy', thereafter Stranger to Europe, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems, and Selected Poems. This is the first of sixteen poems written in Italy during the years 1944 to 1945.

16 AIR RAID BEFORE DAWN
South African Poetry: A New Anthology, Stranger to Europe, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems, and Selected Poems.

17 THE PARTING
The Cradock Boys' High School Magazine, (1949), pp 40-41. An extensively revised version appeared later in Stranger to Europe, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems, and Selected Poems.

18 TO ANY YOUNG SOLDIER
The Sable, (January, 1945), p7; The Outspan, (November 14, 1952), p35; Stranger to Europe, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems.

19 MOMENT IN APULIA
The Isis, No 1048, (Oxford, February, 1947), p16.

20 LETTER FROM MONTE STANCO
Songs and Ballads, but dated 'Autumn 1944'. Butler recounts the circumstances of the poem's birth in the Introduction to Songs and Ballads, p3.

21 BALLAD FOR THE BOYS
Inside Information: Stories, Sketches, Poems by Serving South Africans, (Durban, May 1945), pp30-33.

22 ON THE BRINK

The Student Movement, (December,1945), pp 26-28.

23 THREE GLANCES AT ONE PHOTOGRAPH

Songs and Ballads; the indifferent tone and the use of thematic imagery - the weather - suggest the 1940's.

24 ELEGY

Excerpts appeared in Poets in South Africa: An Anthology, and Standpunte 10 (1) (August/September 1955), pp 1-17. The complete poem first appeared in Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems.

25 ANYWHERE

Selected Poems. Thematically this poem pre-dates 'On First Seeing Florence'; its preference for the old, classical ways is the poet's preparation for receiving the old world of Florence.

26 ON FIRST SEEING FLORENCE

New Coin, (Grahamstown, 1968). Butler himself provides the history of this poem's metamorphosis which stretched over twenty-four years. The poem is, however, a war poem, and belongs in this period.

27 GIOTTO'S CAMPANILE

Standpunte 6(1), (October, 1951), pl; Stranger to Europe, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems, The Penguin Book of South African Verse, and Selected Poems.

28 DECEMBER 1944

Stranger to Europe, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems, and Selected Poems.

29 1945 BITTER LITTLE BALLAD

Standpunte 6(1), (October, 1951), pp1-2, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems, and Selected Poems.

30 CAPE COLOURED BATMAN

Standpunte 5(1), (October,1950) pp 19-21; Towards the Sun: A Miscellany of Southern Africa, compiled by Roy Macnab, (London, Collins 1950); The Outspan, (November 14, 1952), p35, Stranger to Europe, Poets in South Africa: An Anthology; A Book of South

African Verse, selected by Guy Butler, (London, Cape Town, O.U.P., 1959), Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems, The Penguin Book of South African Verse, and Selected Poems.

31 MOMENT IN KERRY

The Oxford Viewpoint, (Oxford, 1947), p 15; The Isis, (1947), p 16. This is the first of three poems written in Ireland in 1945.

32 WATCHING THE SEED-GRASS

Songs and Ballads.

33 STRANGER TO EUROPE

Theoria, (1952), p 49, as'Exile! Re-published in Stranger to Europe, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems, A Book of South African Verse, Selected Poems, and A New Book of South African Verse in English, selected by Guy Butler and Chris Mann,(Cape Town, O.U.P., 1979).

34 FAREWELL IN A FORMAL GARDEN

Stranger to Europe, and Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems. This is the first of three poems written in England late 1945 to early 1946.

35 AUBADE

Standpunte 5(1), (October 1950), pp 18-19; Stranger to Europe, Poets in South Africa: An Anthology, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems, and Selected Poems.

36 1946 WINTER SOLSTICE

Oxford Poetry, (1947), p 12-14, and in The Oxford Viewpoint, (1947), 1947.

37 LETTER TO DESMOND AND NORAH STUTCHBURY JUNE 1946

Stranger to Europe, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems.

38 HOMECOMING

Theoria, (1952), p 50, Stranger to Europe, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems, and Selected Poems.

39 AFTER TEN YEARS

Stranger to Europe, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems. The last section of the poem appeared in Poetry Commonwealth, (London, Winter, 1948-49), p3, and in Poets in South Africa: An Anthology. Butler wrote After Ten Years at Rhodes where he had been a student ten years previously.

40 IAGO'S HANDKERCHIEF SONG

Songs and Ballads, but written while Butler was a student at Oxford in 1946.

41 1947 TO A STATUE OF THE VIRGIN

Standpunte 9(1), (1954), pp 26-30, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems. Butler wrote this poem in France as the sub-title indicates: 'Seen near Les Beaux, Provence, July 1947'.

42 1948 THE UNDERDOGS

Vista, (Johannesburg, 1950), pp 60-61, Stranger to Europe, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems, and Selected Poems. This poem marks Butler's sudden awakening to the political position in South Africa when he returned to take up a lectureship at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1948.

43 SUNDOWNER

Standpunte 5(1),(October 1950), pp 22-23, Stranger to Europe, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems, and Selected Poems.

44 1950 GAME

Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems and Selected Poems.

45 1953 LIVINGSTONE CROSSES AFRICA

Standpunte 10(5), (April/May 1956), pp 1-3, and Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems. An excerpt appeared in Poets in South Africa: An Anthology. The majority of the following twelve poems represent Butler's attempt to dramatise his search for belonging, the chief stimulus of his writing at this time.

46 1954 HOME THOUGHTS

Africa South, (Cape Town, October-December 1956),

pp 124-128, A Book of South African Verse, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems, and Selected Poems. The poem was inspired by a visit to North Africa and, like 'Livingstone Crosses Africa', written in Italy. It has also appeared in A New Book of South African Verse in English.

47 1953 BRONZE HEADS

Contrast,(Cape Town, Autumn, 1963), pp 39-43. This poem clearly grew from the same visit to North Africa.

48 MYTHS

Poets in South Africa: An Anthology, A Book of South African Verse, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems, The Penguin Book of South African Verse, and Selected Poems.

49 1955 HAVING SEEN THROUGH THE PATHETIC FALLACY

Songs and Ballads.

50 SURVEYOR

South of the Zambezi, (London and New York, 1966), A Penguin Book of South African Verse, and Selected Poems.

51 POST MORTEM

Songs and Ballads.

52 PIETA

A Book of South African Verse, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems.

53 DAVID

The South African PEN Centre Yearbook,(Johannesburg, 1956-1957), p66, A Book of South African Verse, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems and Selected Poems.

54 1956 AFTER A FUNERAL

Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems and Selected Poems.

55 PATIENCE

Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems.

56 OCCURRENCE

PEN 1960, (Johannesburg), p 59, Stranger to Europe

with Additional Poems and Selected Poems.

57 1957 KEEPING A DISTANCE

Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems.

58 CRADOCK MOUNTAINS

Stranger to Europe With Additional Poems and Selected Poems. A feature of the poems of the following decade is their African and South African flavour.

59 1958 FLESH AND BONE

Songs and Ballads.

60 BODY GROWS OLD, HEART STAYS YOUNG

Songs and Ballads 1978 (but begun twenty years before as Butler relates in the Introduction to Songs and Ballads) and A New Book of South African Verse in English.

61 1960 TOURIST INSIGHT INTO THINGS

South of the Zambezi and Selected Poems.

62 PROFLIGATE PARSON

P.E.N. 1960, p26, Selected Poems.

63 1961 ISIBONGO OF MATIWANE

South of the Zambezi and Selected Poems.

64 1962 MOUNTAIN

New Coin, V2 No 1, March 1966, p2, Selected Poems.

65 1963 SWEET-WATER

The Cape Argus (Cape Town, May 25, 1963), South of the Zambezi, Selected Poems, A New Book of South African Verse.

66 FARMER

South of the Zambezi.

67 GREAT-GREAT-GRANDMOTHER

Selected Poems.

68 1964 DREAM OF A BUFFER STRIP

New Coin, (Nov 1972,)8: 3,4; p32.

69 PILOT

South of the Zambezi.

70 1965 GRAVE ROBBERS
South of the Zambezi.

71 A PRAYER FOR ALL MY COUNTRYMEN
New Coin (Jan 1965) 1:1 p12, South of the Zambezi and Selected Poems.

72 1966 THE DRUM OF THE DEAD
South of the Zambezi.

73 1967 WHOEVER-WHATEVER-YOU-ARE
New Coin, (April 1970) 6:1, p2 and Selected Poems.

74 AYLIFF AND THE LEPERS
Selected Poems.

75 1968 A SCHOOLMASTER'S BURIAL SERVICE
Selected Poems.

76 IN MEMORIAM J.A.R., DROWNED, EAST LONDON
Selected Poems.

77 INTERRUPTED LETTER, FROM HOSPITAL
Selected Poems.

78 1970 NEAR HOUT BAY
Selected Poems.

79 NATAL 1497
Songs and Ballads.

80 1972 THE DIVINE UNDERGROUND
New Coin (Nov 1972) 8: 3,4 p1 and Selected Poems.

81 1973 MENS SANA
Selected Poems.

82 SONG
Selected Poems.

83 TO AN AGING FRIEND, AFTER HER DIVORCE
Songs and Ballads.

84 1973 THE OLD MAN'S FIDDLE
Songs and Ballads.

85 THOMAS PHILIPPS'S PICNIC, 1821
Songs and Ballads.

86 1974 LISBON: 15th CENTURY BARCAROLE
Songs and Ballads.

87 1976 HOMELAND HAIKU
Songs and Ballads.

88 1977 SOWETO
Songs and Ballads: Butler's response to the Township Riots of that year.

89 LAZARUS
Songs and Ballads.

90 EPITAPH
Songs and Ballads, and A New Book of South African Verse as 'Epitaph for a Poet'.

Poems which are not readily available in the standard collections/selections of Butler's verse have been quoted in full in this thesis.

CHAPTER ONE

FIRST POEMS

The question of belonging amounts to an obsession in the writings of Guy Butler. It is the subject of his lectures and essays; it provides the philosophic basis for his dramatic works; and it is the single most important generator of his entire poetic output. What this study, then, attempts to examine and evaluate is the treatment of this highly complex issue in Butler's poetry.

On a political and cultural level Butler's concern is for the English-speaking South African: his place in this country, the political and cultural role he has to play. In the essay 'Reflections in a Ski-Hut'[1] he writes: 'Culturally we (i.e. the English-speaking South Africans) are parasites existing on an imported and diluted spirit.' This comment recurs in later prose works and lectures, in numerous metaphorical variations: in the lecture 'The Difficulties of Teaching a Non-Indigenous Literature'[2] he writes: 'So far we have been content to live on the good old imported wines,' while, in the lecture 'The Language and the Land,' we are 'flotsam on the tide of other peoples' nationalities.'[3] The English-speaking South African has little sense of belonging, lacks identity, lacks that 'strong and rather exclusive national sentiment'[4] which characterizes the Afrikaner.

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1) **Written in Switzerland in 1946, published in Vandag (January 1947) pp26-28.**

2) **A lecture delivered at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1949; p8 of ms.**

3) **p6 of ms.**

4) **'The English Poet in South Africa', The Listener (May 1956); S.A. Publisher and Bookseller, Vol 8 No 3 (May/June 1958)**

His indebtedness and sense of belonging to the land of his origin hampers his settling in the country of his adoption. Nor have English South African writers done much to solve this problem. Our cultural poverty - 'not one popular ballad to cover their cultural nakedness' - is due largely to the fact that in their choice of subject and diction they have failed 'to translate Africa into Art'; our beautiful South African names are still 'savage'. 'The mimosa, the kaffirboom, the protea, the aloe...', 'kraals and cattle-dams', stories of The Great Trek: all of these could have been 'made significant by our imaginations when young'[5] if they had been used by writers. This would also have given us a general historical awareness of how we have got to where we are. This thought from the first volume of Butler's autobiography, Karoo Morning, crystallizes the notion:

> If you have a feeling for the past, you have the assurance that the chaos and excitements that occur in the present will be integrated, composed and ultimately reconciled in that inevitable landscape. But if you are future-orientated, the beautiful composition breaks up as it reaches you, or you break it; and you never get into it, it is always fragmenting and falling apart. [6]

Instead of 'a feeling for the past', or of directly confronting that which is typically South African, Butler perceives 'a sense of tension between Africa and Europe'[7] in South African English literature.

This tension is inevitably present in the works of writers who fail to identify with a community, or to find 'the assurance that they are speaking on behalf of some community. [8]

---

5) 'The Difficulties of Teaching a Non-Indigenous Literature,' p 6.
6) Karoo Morning, (Cape Town, David Philip, 1977), p59.
7) 'The English Poet in South Africa', p680.
8) Ibid. p681.

For Butler himself this ethnic problem becomes an artistic one. This 'tension between Africa and Europe' is present in much of his own poetry, often explicitly. His recognition of these conflicting forces is captured in his early verse. His attempt to reconcile them becomes the subject of much of his later poetry, where growing perception is reflected in a growing complexity of style. In the poetry of the Sixties Butler's acceptance of his South African identity is mirrored in the simple clear style of his narrative poems.

These lectures and essays serve as Butler's poetics in several other respects too. It is doubtless true that Butler takes it upon himself to provide the remedy for our several ailments. His verse brims with particulars which have 'roots and associations in the (South African) readers' mind.' He himself writes the ballads and songs which our cultural forebears have failed to provide. He studiously follows his own advice, so convincingly set out in the lecture 'The Difficulties of Teaching a Non-Indigenous Literature':

> I believe the popularity of poetry would be enhanced if teachers would stress its sheer descriptive and narrative qualities:.....
>
> The five senses must be trained. No great writer is without a strong sensory equipment...No one can write well, let alone enjoy good writing, unless he sees and hears and touches and tastes with zest and discrimination. 9

Vividly sensous description abounds in his verse, and it seems apt that the poet found it necessary to set this idea to verse. This simple poem, written as early as 1938 and never collected, could well serve as Butler's poetic manifesto:

---

9) p8.

Poem

Live through the body. Let the sense
Receive uncensored the naked second.
Return to your flesh from the walled-up waste
Where no birds built, and eyes, too chaste,
Never dreamt how outside girl-eyes beckoned.

The split-second glimpse of an almond in white
Is more than the sop of eternity.
Press to your palate this summer's grape:
Feel how your flesh is a violent cape
Riding rough through a shivering sea.

For what is the use of will and brain
But to serve the red red heart? Listen, and live
Close to its beat, its lyrical
Cry to create, caress and fill
All earth with the fire and ice of love.

This is obviously an early poem: it is bold, even reckless in tone and melodramatic in its labouring of worn-out-sounding phrases, such as 'the naked second', 'the sop of eternity', 'riding rough', 'the fire and ice of love'. None the less its clear sense is tempered by the Keatsian echo in line 8:

'Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;'

'Ode on Melancholy'

The celebration of the senses is a characteristic feature of later poems. However, Butler's 'sense of movement through time' does not often allow him the indulgence of a moment: an experience is rarely seen as a moment or two in isolation, severed from past or future. The poem 'Prospect' defines more exactly what Butler demands: a celebration of the senses as 'the chief inlets of the soul'.[10]

Prospect

I stand silent. Rich is this sodden world
Where pale, grey flame of roving mist
Burns among the trees; where living scents
Of bark and moss and mud steam densely up
Like smoke from earth to heaven: while a shy silence
Flowers and fades again in valleys deep
That lie between the undulating winds.

---

10) W. Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Plate 4.

And I know someday my soul shall move
As quiet flame along the lives of men:
That all my pain and heart's dark loneliness
Shall be as incense mellowing my soul:
And sudden spurts of peace shall come at times
Unasked-for in the toil and fret of things.

And now, while mist rises and wind dies,
A few birds sing, and dying sunlight glows
Upon my cold damp face and quiet hands.
Peace comes, unspeakable..for, bathing here awhile
In the sunset's scarlet pool, my soul shakes free
And haunts those boundless seas of warmth that surge
Upon the shores of shape and sound and sense.

Again, as in 'Poem', the tendency for cliché jars: 'my pain and heart's dark loneliness', 'the toil and fret of things', 'those boundless seas of warmth'; the contrived effect of 'mist' compared with 'flame', simply in order to complete the metaphor in lines 8 and 9, where the speaker's 'soul' becomes the 'flame' moving among 'men', presumably touching them to life pentecostally in much the same way as the mist nurtured an evolutionary breeding ground. Clearly, sensory perception profoundly influences or affects the spirit. This process becomes a formula in Butler's later work. Another early lyric, 'Coal', may serve as the praxis of the poetics:

Coal

The coals glow, giving to you and me
Sun's warmth stored a million years ago
In days when evolution's latest effort
Was the ten-top reptile in a tepid sea.

I wonder if we ever shall evolve
Beyond the simple beauty of this hour:
You, drying your hair before this ancient heat
And I, aware of your primaeval power.

The first stanza echoes the opening stanza of Wilfred Owen's 'Miners':

There was a whispering in my hearth
   A sighing of the coal
Grown wistful of a former earth
   It might recall.

The situations are similar, and the weight of time, millions of years, presses heavily on both. But that is where the similarity ends: Owen pursues his situation to its bitter, anti-war conclusion; Butler writes a love poem. Significantly, Owen writes from the battlefields of the First World War: Butler has as yet experienced no war-action at all. His only conviction, at this stage, is that man is part of the great family of Nature. The sensuous experience of feeling the heat of the fire is associated with the equally sensuous experience of watching his love drying her hair 'before this ancient heat': both are sources of energy, both are 'primaeval', and both, by implication, part of the life cycle. Here is another kind of belonging which five years of war-action **would** force the young poet to examine: man's belonging to the family of God and Nature. A pre-war lyric, 'Servant Girl', dating from the same period as 'Coal', is Butler's simplest statement of this theme. The poem is nothing more than a sketch of a Fingo girl, singing while she washes frocks in a river. Yet, for all that it appears insignificant, Butler revised the poem twice. The first two versions differ from each other only in the substitution of the phrase 'Bantu girl' for 'Native girl.' But a comparison of the second stanzas of the second and third versions reveals both improved craftsmanship as well as a growing articulacy. Here are the two second stanzas in full:

> And singing a chant which seems more integral
> With hill, water and the sun
> Than any harmony or interval
> From my taught tongue.
>
> And singing a song which seems more integral
> With rain-rinsed sky and sand-stone hill
> Than any cadence wrung
> From my taut tongue.

In these improvements Butler's musical sensibility is evident. 'And singing a song' reads more smoothly because of the alliteration, than 'And singing a chant.'

The image of a 'rain-rinsed sky' is appropriate to the subject - a girl washing frocks - and suggests cleanliness and freshness, thus showing more clearly where the speaker's sympathy lies. But more important is the sense of locality, of a particular context, added by 'sand-stone hill.' The word 'cadence' in line 3 more easily suggests verse than its musically technical predecessor, while the word 'wrung' enhances the theme, particularly when viewed alongside the final improvement, viz. 'taut' for 'taught'. The former suggests that the tongue is rigid, unaccustomed to giving shape to local sensations, feelings, and thoughts; inhibited, rather than schooled. At the root of the speaker's envy of the girl's intuitively intimate relationship with her natural environment lies an awareness of his own essential 'foreignness': his relationship is both 'taught' and 'taut', his utterances 'wrung' from him, while hers flow like the 'amber waters' of the stream. He is an outsider: she, like the stream, belongs so entirely that she seems always to have been there. Something of Wordsworth's awe and frustration at his inability to comprehend the song of 'The Solitary Reaper' - 'Will no one tell me what she sings? -' is present in Butler too. The servant girl, like Wordsworth's Maiden, seems to be singing 'As if her song could have no ending'.

This early poem exhibits two features that play a prominent role in Butler's later verse. The first is the use of contrast. The difference between the servant girl and the speaker underlines the theme of the poem. The second and more significant of the two is the association of man with Nature. In the case of 'Servant Girl' the girl's association with her surroundings is such that she seems part of it. Butler often employs metaphor drawn from Nature, flora and fauna, and the seasonal cycle in particular, to underline man's belonging to the vast world of Nature.

Both contrast and the association with surroundings occur in 'Karroo Town 1939', probably Butler's first war poem. The poem is interesting as it foreshadows the poet's later attempts to

understand the conflicting influences in his life. In bold, natural imagery, Butler sketches the almost primitive life in the little Karroo town:

> ... a region of thunderstorm and drought
> Under an agate sky,
> Where red sand whirlwinds wander through the summer,
> Or thunder grows intimate with the plain, and rain
> Is a great experience like birth or wonder:

Like the servant girl, the farmers are intimately associated with their environment:

> Here climate integrates the landsman with his soil
> And life moves on to the dictates of the season.

And, again like the servant girl, there is an inevitability and permanence about their lives:

> It seems that farmers discussing the weather,
> Arguing prices round the cattle pens,
> Might well repeat the ritual
> On the last stock-fair in time.

Into this order, somewhat ominously, comes a military band, noisily proclaiming Britain's right to expect her colonies to fight for the Empire. Thus the contrast is established:

> Europe asserts
> Her infallible remote control,

the threat to disrupt life in the town. It is more than a threat, for war will bring changes:

> Divide
> The father from the son,
> The child from the home,

But, triumphantly, the poem returns to that which cannot be touched by war:

> The trumpets bay in unison
> Imperative demands upon our lives.
> ....
> But cannot shake the rockstill shadows of the hills
> Obeying remote instructions from the sun alone.

Europe's control is acknowledged, but not accepted. There is nothing in the speaker's tone that suggests submission: in fact, the description of 'the catalysing sight and sound' is clinical, perhaps even resentful in tone. The town, on the other hand, is portrayed with warmth as Butler stresses its rightful, valid, and independant existence in this abacus-image:

> The village is strung like a bead of life on the rail.

Total acceptance is absent here too, though, as is evident in the occasional touch of light mockery:

> Here the market price of wool
> Comes second only to the acts of God.

Butler seems uncertain about the forces he depicts, and the role they will play in his life. It is significant, however, that at this stage he can boldly assert the right of the Karroo Town: the poem ends as a celebration of the permanence of the way of life in that town, a way of life that is inseparably associated with Nature.

Nature's supremacy is the theme of another early poem, 'Common Dawn', written in South Africa before Butler's first exposure to war-action. The poem depicts a sentry standing guard, observing the 'day's way of dawning'. He marvels at the clouds brightening, birds awakening, the breeze brushing the grass about his knees. He is struck by how very special 'Such sweet and subtle commonplace' really is. What moves him most is the apparent 'eternal' being of the hills. An early version of the poem, titled 'The Common Dawn' has this fourth stanza:

> .. the dew remains
>
> And catches light and kindles in the rays
> Of a new day, like other days
> In the journal of our joys and pains.

emphasizing the permanence of Nature contrasted with the transitory 'journal of our joys and pains.' The later, collected version of the poem has a new fourth stanza:

On every blade from here to where
Alien sentries, watching, share
The view of fatal plains.

This is a significant change because it introduces the idea of conflict, of man at war, strangely reconciled by the seductive charm of the glory of Nature: 'How universal all this air,'. The vastly superior natural episode asserts Nature's archetypal primacy, and harmonizes man's petty differences.

Thus in his early verse Butler polarizes the conflicting tendencies which were to become so central to his later work. The conviction that man belongs and will continue to belong regardless of circumstances is present, but is as yet unchallenged The war would provide the challenge: Butler responded to his altered circumstances with compassion and horror, as is evident in this uncollected poem dating from the poet's Egypt-period:

Fragment

Here in the bloodless sand immune from war we wait.
Between the inevitable battle and the memory of home,
Between the lover's wish and the soldier's hardened will,
We live and train, we wonder and we wait.

Now on the Steppes where rivers are frozen to iron
Armies rut the world of snow and dawn
Cracks open beneath the hammer of the guns.

Now in Illyrian Alps Tito's guerrillas turn
Hopeful eyes to Italy, around whose bleeding calf
The tournequet is slackened on the artery to Rome.

Now beneath these same indifferent stars
Black, avenging bombers groan above the Rhine,
Pouring fear and fire on factory and home.

And not one mile of coast, no yard of shore
From Skaggerak to Toulon, from Bosphorous to Split,
But has its sentry watching the menace of the sea.

Watching from the concrete pit, behind the mines and wire,
Waiting for the great assault on a certain hill or road
Where we, now waiting here, will meet the hidden hour.
And judgment by the cold criteria of war.

The change of tone is startling. Gone is the conviction that man belongs in his natural surroundings: here man is clearly at variance with his surroundings, seeming to have lost his place, trapped, as it were, between two states: 'the inevitable battle' and 'the memory of home'; 'the lover's wish' and 'the soldier's hardened will'. The quiet confidence in Nature's immutability seen in the tone of 'Common Dawn' and 'Karroo Town 1939' has made way for a bewildered, stunned response to what is an assault on Nature:

> ... and dawn
> Cracks open beneath the hammer of the guns.
> ....
> ..... to Italy, around whose bleeding calf
> The tourniquet is slackened on the artery to Rome.
> ....
> ...bombers groan above the Rhine.
> ....
> .....the menace of the sea.

Nature is distorted, reduced to a mechanical level: 'rivers are frozen to iron -'. In these surroundings man cowers like a pitiful animal: 'Watching from the concrete pit, behind the mines and wire,'. It is not only Nature but man, too, that has changed. Relentlessly Butler continues to examine this change. In 'El Kahira', written soon after 'Fragment' and also uncollected, his awareness of the spiritual decadence of Cairo society makes for a note of disgust that is new in Butler's poetry.

El Kahira

> In a doorway, half-ajar,
> She pauses, sways and throws -
> Not cassia or jasmin
> Nor oleander, rose
> Not even a flamboyant
> That burns beside the Nile
> But the withered flower of the streets
> A stale commercial smile.
>
> A soulless comedy in the streets, straight sex in the cabarets
> Time has burnt man's soul to ash, but left his flesh to play
> A Pantomine of appetites that have no rein or leash.

Mohamed Ali's minarets are grey through the khamseen's red;
The geometric pyramids are plundered of their dead -
And the Past is sold by dragomen, piecemeal for more Baksheesh.

It is not difficult to see why neither of these poems was ever revised for collection. 'Fragment', in particular, is little more than the single statement made in the first stanza. The poem does not move beyond, or even behind that point, but is content with simply repeating it. Furthermore, Butler's frequent recourse to clichéic imagery, such as 'the hidden hour' and 'the cold criteria of war' reveals an attitude one can hardly believe in. He seems to be adopting a point of view that is not yet his own. 'El Kahira' is more successful. The contrast between the various flowers, products of nature, and what the prostitute has to offer, 'A stale commercial smile' clearly establishes the speaker's contempt. Unfortunately, the poem does not live up to this promising beginning: an 'explanatory' second stanza, couched in metaphysical imagery reminiscent of T.S. Eliot, deters further enquiry, in particular the line, 'Time has burned man's soul to ash, but left his flesh to play...' But the third stanza touches on a point close to the poet's heart, and one begins to perceive the more deeply-felt reason for the speaker's disgust....'the Past is sold by dragomen...', mourns the speaker. One need only recall the thought, quoted earlier,[11] from Karoo Morning, concerning Butler's reverent attitude to the past, to comprehend the seriousness of the charge laid here. If the Egyptians are selling their past, they are condemning their future. In this sense 'El Kahira' and 'Karroo Town 1939' make an interesting comparison: one recalls how, in the earlier poem, it was the apparent immutability of the town and its people that made for the speaker's confidence in its future. Even war, he thought, could not alter basic circumstances. In 'El Kahira' war has clearly begun to take its toll.

But of the war itself Butler has as yet said little, and clearly thought little. For at about the same time as the depressing 'Fragment' and 'El Kahira' he exploded into lyrical praise of

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11) See page 13 of this thesis.

nature, and emphatic re-statement of the belief that man is part of her cycle, in a poem revealing little evidence of 'the soldier's hardened will.'

Perhaps the fact that 'Syrian Spring' was published three times before appearing in Stranger to Europe is an indication of its qualities. In a richly sensuous opening stanza Butler sketches the arrival of Spring in the Syrian landscape. A tone of wonder prevails as sights, sounds, and smells are layered in, richly enhanced by alliteration:

> The stammer of the fork-tongued waterfall
> Swells at dusk, shaking the still cold hills.
> The white skin peels from the hillsides, withers,
> Revealing the black soaked soil of the terraces
> Forming a giant staircase down to the sea.

A sense of mystery is evoked by the image in line three, in which the melting snow is compared to the peel of a ripe fruit and sustained by the use of words such as 'Foams' and the delicate 'elicit' and 'intimate.' The earlier versions of the poem reveal a clear preference for sound-imagery in their use of the word 'peels' in line three. Obviously Butler considered the loss of the fruit-image as a greater liability. The second stanza tells how the peasants begin with their 'ploughing and sowing', and it is here that the theme is taken up: 'And, changing a hillside, they change my heart.'

The speaker, witnessing the rejuvenation of a landscape, feels a corresponding lifting of his own spirit, for this is 'the miracle time', when each creature 'has a shadow to cast in the sun.' This miraculous natural event has the effect of wakening the speaker and recalling his humanity; he rediscovers his own, unique position in the world of Nature:

> The heaven I sought was all this while in my heart,
> Distinct and rare as birds in the orchard
> Native, natural, the stem of a tree.

Nature is the victor in 'The Colossi of Memnon', a poem reflecting Butler's thoughts on viewing (and sketching) the giant statues of the Ethiopian Kings at Thebes in Egypt.

The Colossi of Memnon

An incredible calm is on them still
These the Colossi, the seated kings,
These cold memorials of arrogant will
On the clay of the river's wanderings.

Fretting aeons of wind and frost
Have smitten them, shoulder, lip and thigh;
Featureless they face the implacable East,
The sun and the moon's monotony.

Beneath them generations breed
In sun to season's simple clock;
Above by night the planets speed
Derisive of river, man and rock.

And in the fields all spring and summer
Bees that hive in the cracks of their stone,
Though they die in a month, continue the murmur
Of life that is older than brain or bone.

While pigeons hover on gentle wings
Above the Colossi, the broken kings.

There can be little doubt that this poem was inspired by Shelley's 'Ozymandias' for the situations are similar. Yet 'The Colossi of Memnon' reveals a freshness of thought and an originality of diction clearly lacking in the earlier uncollected poems. It also possesses a sense of development, an apparent shift in point of view, making for a finely poised irony. The opening lines strike an impressive note: the word 'seated' indicates power and complacent permanence. But this impression is immediately questioned by the fourth line. The words 'wanderings' and 'clay' indicate ironically an unstable foundation for such huge monuments. Their doom is spelt out in stanza two: the elements, allied with time, will slowly wear them away.

Already the Colossi are anonymous, facing the relentless, impersonal wheeling of the skies. In stanza three the speaker implies that the humans who 'breed' 'Beneath them' are somehow inferior, and the superiority of the firmament is reiterated. But it is in stanza four that the main point is made. For in the 'Bees that hive in the cracks of their stone' the poet sees, paradoxically, a symbol of greater endurance than the stone statues. The bees live for only 'a month', produce but a 'murmur'; yet that murmur is evidence of an order older than man's. The concluding couplet drives home the point, but subtly, working through suggestion rather than explanation: the contrast between the 'pigeons' which 'hover on gentle wings', seemingly insubstantial and frail, and the great, stone Colossi underlines the irony.

The substitution of 'broken' for the earlier 'seated' is a contributing factor. Butler's point is clear: whatever else the Colossi may be, they are not alive; they neither 'murmur' nor 'hover'. They are not part of the life-cycle, but 'cold memorials' and as such not immutable. The speaker is, of course, easily identified; he has the same quiet confidence of the speaker of 'Poem', 'Coal', 'Servant Girl', 'Karroo Town 1939', and 'Common Dawn'. Butler's early attempts to grasp the influence of the war on himself and on man in general remain nothing more than attempts. But we do not have long to wait to hear him speak on that subject with authority. In fact, one very early war poem, written in Syria in 1942, bears the seeds of the new Butler whose growth we shall trace in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

WAR POEMS

'Bomb Casualty' is a description, or an account, of the speaker's thoughts as he gazes at the body of a fellow-soldier killed by an exploding bomb. Passionate, sensuous recollections are juxtaposed with the boy's present lifelessness:

> These hands that felt the warmth of breasts
> And tautened at the tremor of a thigh,
> These arms that clasped, lie random, loose,
> Limp on the sand, an empty noose.

Hands and arms once fired with passionate purpose now lie 'random, loose'. The 'empty noose' metaphor completes a grim ironic reversal: the givers and receivers of life are now the takers of life. In the second stanza lips, accustomed to passionate kisses, now are silent, dumb, can only

> ...kiss the careless wind, the bloodless sky.

The development of this metaphor reaches its climax in the last stanza, when death itself is portrayed as a lover:

> ...from the wings of metal seraphim,
> Death paused a second to ravish him.

The soldier's love-affair with death has reached its climax, and one realizes, with some surprise, that the young poet, in uncharacteristic bitterness, is celebrating death. Butler contrasts his sensuous, 'natural' relationship with his present 'bloodless' state, and the past with present. In this respect 'Bomb Casualty' is similar to Wilfred Owen's 'Greater Love' as an examination of the first stanza will show:

> Red lips are not so red
> As the stained stones kissed by the English dead.
> Kindness of wooed and wooer
> O Love, your eyes lose lure
> When I behold eyes blinded in my stead!

It would seem fair to suppose that Butler was reading, or had been reading, war poetry of a previous generation, as indeed he certainly was reading Keats, Wordsworth and many other poets' works. One would certainly expect him to imitate techniques which work, to borrow from his immediate predecessors. There is much evidence of borrowing in Butler's poetry. A notable example is 'The Colossi of Memnon', discussed above on page 25, a poem which owes much to Shelley's 'Ozymandias'. Yet it is in this very poem that the most poetically successful expression of the early Butler's view of war and Nature may be found. In the same way 'Bomb Casualty' may be said to have been modelled on 'Greater Love', in so far as the association of death with passion is the central metaphor in both poems. Yet the concept is not new to Butler: it is in fact, as will be seen, a recurring theme in the war poems. Moreover, Butler dramatizes the death/passion relationship into an appropriate climax: a soldier's love affair with death. In 'Greater Love' love and death are associated but wedged apart, providing an ironic comment on patriotism. They are, indeed, different poems. Here, as elsewhere, Butler's 'borrowing' enriches his work. This echo in 'Bomb Casualty' calls to mind the bitterness and disillusionment that moved Owen to writing poetry: Butler is clearly part of that tradition. T.S. Eliot places this matter into proper perspective. On the subject of borrowing, T.S. Eliot says:

> One of the facts that might come to light in this process is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar

> essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors, we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.[12]

'Tobruk Visited, December 1943' begins by stressing the mechanical life of man at war: warplanes are cutting 'A course of sunlit metal towards a target of blood.' Contrasted with this is Nature's calm perfection: gulls weaving 'a leisurely flight to settle over their food.' The poem continues to depict, melodramatically, how a platoon is taken prisoner, focusing on one soldier:

> Listless, he stood where sun on the stones
> Warmed fossilized shells of an ancient ocean.

His pride is broken, and he is numbed in thought and feeling: painfully he recalls 'Windmill, window at dusk, house near the wattle trees?' The past, in the form of scenes of his home, intrudes on the present, as in 'Bomb Casualty'. However slight and insubstantial its power may seem - 'In his heart the past was a ghost' - his senses are aware of his present surroundings only in so far as they separate him from home. Significantly, the jagged coastline becomes cadaverous fingers:

> ... eyes only saw this coast
> Dipping its bone-white fingers in cold dividing seas.

'Seas' divide him from more than his land. The 'ghost' in his heart indicates that emotional and spiritual alienation that is beginning to set in. In 'Mirage' Butler exposes this alienation as a conscious, self-inflicted precaution. A young soldier, physically isolated behind a 'double row of cotton bars' - mosquito net and camouflage - has also erected emotional barriers:

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12) T.S. Eliot: 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', <u>The Sacred Wood</u>, (London, Methuen, 1966). p48.

> His heart has net and camouflage,
> Protecting him lest Pity should
> Sting to tears, or Fear surprise:

barriers which prove to be powerless, as the memory of home breaks through:

> But still meander, in hot mirage
> The shapes of longing, soft or crude,
> For women he knew, familiar skies.

And particularly when two 'brown-eyed girls' are actually moved to touch him, as the procession passes through Rome, the past rushes in:

> Reminding him, reminding him, -
> Hand on no gun, but gloved in curls,
> And over his body's thirsty sands,
> Breakers bursting, blinding him.

Significantly, it is the physical presence of the Italian girls, sensuously evoked by the word 'brown-eyed,' and the moment of physical contact with them which overwhelms the boy: he lives through the body. Butler has used sound and imagery to suggest movement from vagueness, a state of virtual non-being, to the definite, 'real,' 'living' experience in the last four lines. The predominantly soft sounds in lines 4, 5, and 6 suggest something insubstantial: 'eyes stare' 'Dante's stars', 'smoke', 'his rationed cigarette', 'Jerks', 'gust', 'disappears.' There is an **aimlessness** about the entire scene, strengthened by the mention of alien, meaningless stars and the image of cigarette smoke floating away. Memories are only 'shapes'; they 'meander in hot mirage.' But after the sensuous experience at the beginning of stanza three, strong sounds, such as the 'g' sound in 'gun' and 'gloved', and the explosive 'b' alliteration in the last line effect a vigorous change of mood: the soldier's senses seem to be revived.

The power of the humanising image from the past, the recollection of home, and the moment of passion seem to wane as Butler's horror at the effect of war on man increases. A feature of many of the subsequent poems is the callous, indifferent tone the speaker adopts. This is evident in 'Air Raid Before Dawn' where the speaker's only vividly felt experience is of fear:

> The shameless naked girl called Fear
> Quivers against my negative flesh.

The war itself is of little consequence. When the moment of fear has passed, the soldiers lapse into indifference, following the course of a piece of shrapnel which

> Skids on the stones of a Roman road
> Leading to Caesar's trisected Gaul,

casually eating mulberries, feeling 'no goad' to be getting on with the war. Even the domestic and probably pleasing sight of a few peasant girls reaping fails to rouse them:

> ...felt like ghosts at a window pane
> who watch the hearth, but remain unknown.

The simile 'like ghosts' points to the essentially feelingless nature of the war-creature developing here. Callously the speaker enumerates various items lying in the aftermath of battle: the bodies of Germans

> ...(swollen, black
> With trucks running over their rag-doll legs);

pages of a letter:

> A German sweetheart's questionmarks
> Quoting a Rhenish Madrigal.

These, pitiful though they be, fail to stir the speaker. The corpses are 'dolls', anonymous, and the letter, ironically an attempt at personal contact, lies virtually unnoticed, failing in its function, incongruously quoting a madrigal. In 'Letter from Monte Stanco' the effect of dehumanisation is achieved by various means, the most significant being a removal from the

dimension of time. The poem describes the futile and disastrous attempts of a company to take a hill in Italy. We recognize the same indifference observed in 'Air Raid Before Dawn':

> ... can't care much if the end of the climb
> Is Golgotha's hill or the hill of the Ark;

and the callousness:

> Others who stalked in single file,
> Who tackled this blasted hill in vain,
> Wrapped in one blanket, stiff in the soil,
> Shut from the leaves, and the lead, and the rain.

But there is something more. The soil is described as 'eroded, old,' the house 'ancient', the track also 'old'. The soldiers are 'shadows to the end of time'. The speaker is 'a shadow' stalking the hill 'with shadows'. He carries 'timeless kit' through 'eternal rain'. In this way Butler reduces man to a link in a chain, an anonymous, shadowy figure, one of the 'ghosts' of 'Air Raid Before Dawn', one with no origin or destiny, eternally damned to performing pointless tasks. The tone of tired refusal to feel futility and despair is Macbeth's:

> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more.

The speaker senses the company of predecessors:

> Mother I feel our single file
> Is doubled now in the dark;

yet feels more alone than ever. All seems 'timeless', 'eternal'; the event seems to have been freed from the dimension of time in order to emphasize the insubstantial nature of the men and their surroundings, and thus increase the effect of hopelessness. The fact that the poem is a letter, addressed to 'Mother' underlines the incongruity of the speaker's impersonal tone. It is also, ironically, an attempt at establishing contact with home,

i.e. the past. The repetition of phrases, as in

> those who're unlucky, by twos, by threes,
> Will join the others who sleep, who sleep;

and ballad-like regularity of alternating tetrametre and trimetre emphasize the mechanical, feelingless nature of the soldier's existence. The effect is mesmeric, visually somewhat like a slow-motion cinematographic sequence shot through mist.

Butler's view of man at war now reaches a point where man becomes dehumanised beyond redemption. In 'On The Brink' the human spirit is seized in the grip of total indifference. Gone is the humanising influence of the home; even nature is powerless to effect lasting change. Man is beyond the reach even of God:

On the Brink

> No ripple of rhythm, shanty, or soldier's song
> Wakes from the white road splitting the afternoon.
> For hours the convoy of trucks just muddles along
>
> Emitting an atonal hum, a disconcerting tune
> Of cylinders, gears; or the rough, irregular
> Rattle and bump, with squeaking springs, and a thin
>
> Break-squeal at a bridge. For hours. So similar
> The figures and faces who ride inside, so dull
> Unknowing: oxen en route to an abattoir.
>
> Not one detachable, gay individual
> To glitter and shout a challenge to tall walled Troy;
> Two hundred uniforms, numbered, deadened by drill,
>
> But quick to take cover and shoot, slick to deploy,
> To kill, or be killed, at a distance. All but lost
> Awareness of being a being. No pain, no joy
>
> Except of the body. One of the heavenless host
> Who, crawling round Time's vast flat vacuum
> At times, are haunted by a timeless ghost.
>
> . . . .
>
> At last where heights of snow and black stone loom
> Against a withdrawn sky, our trucks disperse
> Among first-budding poplar, oaks and broom.

The mad-cap green, inflaming fern and gorse
The heady air, half-drunk with swirling birds,
The reckless water, tumbling down its course,

All strike upon our unused, boyish chords.
Out of our trucks, dead weapons cast aside,
Breaking long-sealed lips with bubbles of words,

We strip and plunge the pool's precipitous side
Through snow-born, clear, baptizing deeps. The shock
Sets free, O undeniable, undenied,

My own, odd voice to echo, rock by rock! -
More than body basks in the last shy sun,
Inhales in hungry lungs the terse, dry smoke.

. . . .

Now in the unmapped heaven of my eye
A dust-mote sails. Hardening to a star
It plumbs a double night: the mind, the sky.

Across the unmapped silence, shy and far,
Then with a closer, clamorous ring,
A nightingale sounds double seas: the ear,

The dark. You ancient asdics, echoing
Between the broken hold of one bare heart
And that Unknown through whom you shine and sing,

How cunningly your rays construct a chart
On which, beyond the harpooned humps of whales,
Beyond the 'here-be-dragons' and 'of China, part',

Beyond the cheeky cherubs belching gales
And shamefaced devils winking through the green,
Lie worlds in wait for patient, Ghost-filled sails.

I'll set no course for worlds which can't be seen,
Nor cram on canvas for a wind unheard;
Enough to guess what voyage might have been.

. . . .

To sail is death. I know this star and bird
That tempt me to a fatal breakaway
Are agents of the long-since banished Word.

Yes, Lord of my dead ancestors, I may
Be moved by these small wonders you perform,
But not enough to take the plunge and pray.

It takes a hero to betray the norm,
To pull up anchor in a failing light,
To end, like Peter, crying in the storm.

I reject Jerusalem's dense night,
The obscure moaning in the olive grove,
And Judas clutching silver, white with fright.

I'll join no reckless underground of love.
Here on the surface there's enough to learn
Among the hordes your anguish cannot save.

I'll not desert Mankind. As one we'll turn
Our heavy phalanxes to greet the day
Or march en masse through doors whose turrets burn.

But still the sound and light-beams play
Upon my self, pin point its little reef
Among the shifting shoals of human clay.

The air's alive with whispers of belief.
A great winged bird sits brooding on the sea.
The vacuum cracks! But every joy and grief

That gives me shape, that tells me how to be,
Sends lightning absolutes to singe my hair.
O Christ come not too close! Be kind to me!

Through stars and nightingales He strikes my ear:
What thou wouldst do, do quickly...
I light
A cigarette. My palms are coinless, clear
These passè superstitions! And it was night.

This long, uncollected poem shows signs of an unfortunate tendency of the poet's, noted earlier, towards explicit statement, and is particularly evident in the first section. In the first three stanzas an effect of deadening sameness and lack of individuality is achieved in sound-images: the convoy of trucks 'just muddles along, / Emitting an atonal hum' playing ' a disconcerting tune / Rattle and bump,'. Onomatopoeiaic effects,

'squeaking springs' and a 'squeal' of brakes add the finishing touch to this mechanical cacophony. Then to the occupants of the convoy of trucks, all 'so similar' and so indifferent to the fate that awaits them that Butler compares them to 'oxen en route to an abattoir'. They are nothing more than 'Two hundred uniforms, numbered, deadened by drill,' alert only to danger. Thus, through imagery, Butler depicts the mechanical, impersonal nature of war. The fact that he then proceeds to state the sense explicitly in the lines 'All but lost / Awareness of being a being' indicates that he does not trust his poem.

The last stanza of the first section contains imagery that is strongly reminiscent of the imagery in 'Letter from Monte Stanco'; here too the soldiers feel removed from the dimension of time: '...crawling round Time's vast, flat vacuum'. They, too, are in the company of a 'ghost'; it is not simply the spirit of soldiers who have come and gone before them, but a manifestation of the Christ.

The second section pays tribute to the power of Nature, for, as the Italian countryside bursts into Spring, 'The madcap green, inflaming fern and gorse,' the soldiers find their 'boyish chords' responding; flinging aside weapons now 'dead' - earlier they were all that seemed alive - talking excitedly, plunging into ice-cold water, basking body and soul in rejuvenating sunlight, the soldiers seem to be experiencing the same miracle as the speaker in 'Syrian Spring'.

But the soul is hardened beyond redemption. The last three sections reveal a spiritual struggle with God, expressed in a sustained metaphor drawn from shipping. The speaker is the mariner who mistrusts the 'ancient asdics', the star and the nightingale, and who refuses to sail beyond known limits; he is the ancient mariner, gazing fearfully at his ancient map, his heart set against venturing past 'the cheeky cherubs belching gales.' He spurns the spiritual, trusts only in his

senses, will 'set no course for worlds which can't be seen.' He lacks the faith, for the God-sent 'asdics' have no foothold in 'the broken hold' of his heart; though he can guess at what lies at the end of such a journey, to sail requires 'patient, Ghost filled sails.' Thus he rejects these 'agents of the long-since banished Word' and systematically sets out to reject Christianity as a whole: ..'Peter, crying in the storm'; 'Jerusalem's dense night', 'the moaning in the olive grove', 'Judas clutching silver, white with fright.' In a strangely twisted way, subscription to religion's appeals would be tantamount to a betrayal of Mankind. Although God intensifies His appeals, the speaker stands firm, with 'coin-less, clear' palms, dismissing Christianity with the aloofness of one who has experienced no stress: 'These passé superstitions!'

It seems strange that Butler did not republish 'On the Brink' in one of the collections. It is an important poem, depicting an advanced stage of dehumanisation brought about by the war. It is, in fact, the only war-poem in which the speaker's cynicism encompasses even religion. The tribute to Nature in the second section is a strong thematic link with the war-poems. The concept of man's spirit enjoying the rejuvenating power of Nature recurs in the war poems, 'Syrian Spring' being the most obvious precedent. The fact that in 'On the Brink' the awakening of the soldiers' spirits through sensous exposure to the elements has no lasting effect is further evidence of the speaker's dehumanisation.

Butler's soldier, having been taken to 'the brink' of regaining his humanity, now seems to revel in his cynicism. It was exactly this attitude that gave rise to the sonnet 'To Any Young Soldier'. The title in itself indicates anonymity. In the octave Butler captures the attitude of the victorious soldier, swaggering into an Italian village after a night of 'especial hell'. He revels in the peasants' hero-worship. Fighting has 'matured' him:

> You whom last year's masters though a fool
> Has learnt from masters in another school
> The meaning of a college cenotaph.

But the hollowness of the speaker's sardonic praise rings audibly. The young soldier is, after all, only a 'Brief hero'. His maturity is nothing more than a mask he has learned to wear, one which enables him to 'Look calmly on shell-torn terraces.' There is a theatrical air about his actions: 'bask/In their dark eyes' praise. Brief hero...' The soldier is the chief actor in a play written by humanity, mechanically acting out the speaker's stage-directions.

Yet this poem fails to move. The speaker's tone is excessively cynical, his attitude to the soldier cruelly taunting: 'Stretch your royal limbs...' At times there is no speaker at all; it seems that no human spirit informs the poem, that there is only the presence of an omnipotent being, coldly calling the shots. In the best of Butler's war-poetry, the poet's all-encompassing compassion is clearly felt. Usually the very underplaying of emotion stresses its presence. Whatever emotions gave birth to 'To Any Young Soldier', compassion was not one of them. Furthermore, Butler seems to have traded the composed objectivity of poems such as 'Letter from Monte Stanco' and 'Air Raid Before Dawn' for a mood which verges on hysteria.

Excessive cynicism and a good deal of self-pity are evident in an uncollected poem from this period, 'Ballad for the Boys'.

Ballad for the Boys

> A section of stupid soldiers sat
>   Close to Cassino in their slit-trenches.
> And what, my hearties, do you think they were at?
>   Talking of war and wine and wenches,
>   When one kill-joy got up and said:
> "I'm sorry to mention a topic that's sad,
>   But the night when Johnnie stopped one in the head
> This is the strange sort of dream I had."

Chorus:

O tell us your dream as we fight for Rome,
Us heros of dreams of the folks back home!

"Old Johnnie on my slit-trench sat,
Not ghostly at all, as you'd believe,
And what do you think old Johnnie'd been at?
He'd just returned from a spot of home leave,
And this is the song that he sang to me
Of what he had seen in his native land:
'It's not quite as rosy as it might be...'
He strummed his guitar with his hand.

Chorus:

'But a good song to sing of the folks back home
When you're fighting the Hun on the road to Rome.'

'There all the strong young students sat,
Their faces disfigured with frowns.'
"Johnnie, Oh Johnnie, what were they at?"
'Studying history's ups and downs:
The lecturer told them clearly too
How certain battles had saved their bacon:
Salamis, Tours and Waterloo,
And Alamein too, 'less I'm mistaken -."

Chorus:
So sing of the hard-working students back home
When you're fighting the Hun on the road to Rome

'There all the well-dressed ladies sat
Around the green bridge table.'
"Johnnie, Oh Johnnie, what were they at?"
'Talking of Boyer, Grant and Gable,
And wasn't Noel grand last night,
So polished, witty and so refined...
My dear, I hear Miss Jones got tight
After her passes had been declined -."

Chorus:

So sing of the gossipping dears back home
When you're fighting the Hun on the road to Rome.

'There all the long-haired highbrows sat,
Cocktails on the arms of their chairs.'
"Johnnie, Oh Jonnie, what were they at?"
'The delicate art of splitting hairs:
Is Stalin an Imperialist
Following the steps of Peter the Great?
One brandished a very well manicured fist
At Hitler and the Nazi state.'

Chorus:

So sing of the first-class brains back home,
When you're fighting the Hun on the road to Rome.

'There all the mighty magnates sat,
Cigars, dark suits, and gold watch-chains'
"Johnnie, Oh Johnnie, what were they at?"
'Shut up, George, the Chairman explains:

The fact is, colleagues, due to taxes
We have only doubled our dividends;
But once the Government relaxes
We hope to make handsome amends.'

Chorus:

So Sing of dividends doubled back home
When you're fighting the Hun on the road to Rome.

'And every night ten thousand sat
In cinemas, clubs, or danced the conga...'
"Johnnie, Oh Johnnie, what were they at?"
'Forgetting their cares a little bit longer;
Their terrible scares about inflation,
The shortage of spares for motor cars;
The price of cosmetics, the small meat ration,
The lack of 'imported' in certain bars...'

Chorus:

So be thankful you're not a civvy back home
When you're fighting the Hun on the road to Rome.

"A shell burst close to where Johnnie sat.
I flattened out, I'll bet you.
Johnnie, Oh Johnnie, what are they at?
Lie flat, you fool, or they'll get you!

But Johnnie just smiled: 'When you're like me,
Shells don't matter, which is sad,
'Cause honestly, George, I'd rather be
Back with the section I would, by Gad!'

Chorus:

For the terrible sacrifices made at home
Are worse than the sweat on the road to Rome!

This ballad is hampered by a weakness similar to that of 'To Any Young Soldier'. In an attempt to evoke sympathy for the

soldiers 'fighting the Hun on the road to Rome', Butler depicts the indifference to their plight of the folks 'in his native land', concluding, with grim irony,

> For the terrible sacrifice made at home
> Are worse than the sweat on the road to Rome!

Again the subjective involvement of the speaker mars the potential objectivity the ballad form may have gained. He fails to gain the reader's sympathy: he already has his own.

The idea that the whole of humanity is to blame for the effect of war on man is also the conclusion of 'December 1944.' In the same level tone of objectivity discussed above, assisted here by the clinical progression of terza rima, the speaker portrays the 'unreality' present in 'Letter from Monte Stanco.' And, as in that poem, the weather plays a significant role:

> Day and night are two greys washed together,
> Run in the web of rain,
> . . . . .

Even his dreams are 'hung with curtains of rain.' Understanding is curtained off: the full significance of the soldier's role is kept from them. But they nevertheless see the true cause:

> ... the scapeghosts of our sins:
> Half-saint, half-beast, he stalks the smothered hills:

This is the soulless character of the soldier, the mask behind which he performs his atrocities. Divorced from feeling, he leaves a trail of blood, is 'Dumb', 'anonymous like the mist.' Even the speaker is 'mummy-wrapped'. All chances of communication are lost, but morning brings a change in the weather: a white world of snow with 'No hint of haze/ But accurate outline at all distances.' A corresponding clarity

of thought in the speaker brings a clear realization of guilt. In stark contrast now are the black hole of the grave and the surrounding snow. Feelings of guilt are articulate: 'the new grave shouts from a black throat through the snow.' Thus the sin against and by humanity is revealed:

> Look at the grave-stain in the crib of snow,
>
> Look at our guilty thirty pieces worth.

The last five stanzas of the poem are sensitively handled, revealing exactly that quality which is lacking in 'To Any Young Soldier.' This is the callous, indifferent speaker of the Butler war-poem:

> Dijointed relics in a blanket sack.
> Cold unstrung limbs.

His habits are itemised:

> Given to cards. Fond of a naked swim.

The apparent paucity of these lines belies the emotional strain they throb to reveal. The skilfully controlled speaker allows himself no sentiment, for it would seem 'gauche among the vulgar guns.' It is in this deliberate denial and suppression of feeling that the poem's strength lies. The analogy to Christ and Judas in the words 'crib' and 'thirty pieces worth' calls to mind the universal sin, and clarifies the point that it is a collective responsibility, a moral weakness that is in our make-up.

The chief source of Butler's metaphor is still Nature, as 'December 1944' indicates. The important role played by the weather has already been discussed. The poem further contains one significant image, comparing the dead boy to a tree:

> What is once his own and twisted stem
> Disturbed the soil, sprung leaves, was bold to grow....?

Butler's use of imagery drawn from Nature, the vegetation in particular, indicates his compassionate view of man: these images are always tenderly handled. It is, furthermore, his metaphor for the concept of belonging. In 'Bitter Little Ballad', man's grotesque awakening into war in contrasted with nature's awakening Spring. The poem begins, like 'Syrian Spring', with images of growth and rejuvenation:

> When stale snow on the lower slope
> Lay thin and loose, a snake-shed skin;
> When chestnut woods were soft with hope
> And buds went juicy, white within ....

Then, in stark contrast, comes the precise intervention of man:

> Our orders were signed by a neat firm hand.

But Spring continues to assert herself as waters of melting snow 'Tinkled all night down moonbright boulders.' The primrose waits impatiently to flower. The peasant girl and her lover 'floated through a moon-drowned land.'

An ominous note shatters this romanticism as 'four hundred kites' prepare for take-off on a distant airfield. In an early version of the poem Butler had the propellors of the planes 'dissecting the sun.' This image does support the theme, but Butler rejected it in favour of 'Spun silver prop-coins into the sun', an image with greater visual accuracy, and with the added virtue of suggesting that war is a game of chance. Here the tone is grimly ironic as the 'Bombardiers, itching at shining sights' are associated with the primrose, impatiently waiting to flower. A similar effect is achieved when 'grey trees shot green/ Defiance at death.' The two forces, War and Nature, are closely associated. Indeed, one is described in terms of the other, until they marry. The primrose, having reached fruition, 'split': so too the wills of men 'Blossomed'

but, ironically, in 'bayonets, wounds, and guns'. In grotesque harmony, 'birdsong and Bren' combine: 'Beauty and death strolled hand in hand.' And finally, the poem returns to the metaphorical weather: the girl has lost her love, and so withdraws into her own winter, denying the rush of Spring, crushing the primrose:

> Impotent, summer shall depart,
> Over the closed bud of her heart.

But the poet's humanity continues to haunt him, recurs in murmurs from the past. Despite the bitterness noted in these poems, despite the increasingly insistent tendency to play down sympathy and compassion, it is not in Butler's power to suppress these emotions. They betray his humanity, often in fragments of verse such as 'Three Glances At One Photograph.' Here the speaker, gazing at a photograph, probably of a sweetheart, seems unmoved: the photograph is a 'flat reflection', it records 'dead seconds'. It is 'a cryptic epitaph' of their relationship. Appropriately enough, the scene is winter: 'naked trees, reeds frozen in the pond.' But the world of 'Syrian Spring', where 'miracles' occur, is present here too. Inexplicably 'a presence returns', to haunt the poet, causing a physically felt re-awakening. Characteristically, Butler compares the change to spring:

> The first wind of spring, shaking the naked branches,
> My tired body quivers with the ghost of his bride,
> A casual flash of phosphor on a single breaker
> Announcing whole oceans thronging in to tide.

The imagery of these lines is a forceful reminder of the power of the senses. Indeed, the poet is not yet dead.

But more significant than these explicit statements is the fact that the very source of these war poems' existence is the poet's compassion, the mainspring of Butler's better war poetry.

Certainly, it was compassion which gave rise to one of the finest poems of the war years, 'Giotto's Campanile.' Here Butler's concern for the effect of war on man is expressed in terms of grief for the city of Florence. His pre-occupation with Florence, which was to culminate in his magnum opus, 'On First Seeing Florence,' derives from his reverence for Dante.

For, apart from being a great European Renaissance centre, Florence is also the birthplace of Dante. Yet Dante lived the greater part of his life out of Florence, an exile, grieving for his 'vision city'. At the root of Butler's grief lies an identification with Dante: Butler, using Dante's terza rima, grieves for Dante's city.

High in Giotto's belltower, the speaker observes the city of Florence, noting the changes wrought by war. He is disturbed by the fact that war has made access to Florence so easy: the city is cheaply available, particularly as he recalls Dante's exile: 'How Dante at what bitter distance bled.' The harsh advent of militancy, 'still heels falling', offers a grim contrast to the once 'atoning belfry'.

In the phrase 'spiral stair' Butler recalls Yeats's gyre-concept;[13] the violent, explosive circumstances of Dante's banishment seem to have returned, for history seems to be repeating itself. The speaker now feels estranged, out of tune with his war-torn surroundings. He is appalled at the indifference of the ascending soldiers to the city that lies below: 'How casually they pause; note landmarks; curse the climb.' The campaniles are transformed into mere chronometers: in a mechanically precise image Butler gives further comment on the inhumanity of war: 'Hammers descend on the bronze...' One is reminded of the soldiers in 'Letter from Monte Stanco,' lost in time; for the speaker now feels 'us all' to be 'riveted' to a specific point in time, but a 'pointless' one. Man has lost his historical rootedness. The 'tidal chime' of Giotto's bells is easily penetrated by the sound of approaching war-

13) C. Bradford: 'Yeats's Byzantium Poems: A study of Their Development', J. Unterecker (Ed): Yeats: A Collection of Critical Essays, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1963), p112.

planes superseding the bells' function, as the sound emitted by them adds to the guns' 'knell' and continues 'tolling' through the night sky. One realizes with some surprise that an ironic reversal of roles has taken place, for the sounds of war have now gained the attribute of tolling the death-knell, in this case 'For quivering loins and unengendered sons.' Passion, and the opportunity of new life, are destroyed: their destruction grotesquely, though appropriately, announced by the sounds of war. The sounds fade, silence returns. There has been no attack. But the speaker grieves for the 'still adored' 'vision city'. He mourns the fact that the 'deep bells of love and pity' are powerless to enter man's hardened heart.

The impact of 'Giotto's Campanile' is largely due to the sound-motif about which Butler has contructed his poem. The poem is set at dusk, a time when clear vision is impossible. The speaker does not see the poem: he hears it. Similarly, it is the reader's auditory sense which has to interpret the action. Long vowel sounds in the first stanza 'Alone', 'atoning', 'grieve', 'heroic', 'apalling', establish the speaker's melancholy frame of mind. The word 'then' in line 6 introduces an ominous note, and soon alliteration - 'spiral stair' - and assonance - 'steel heels' - combine to dispell the pensive gloom that prevails. Broken rhythms enchance the new mood of apprehension: 'How casually they pause; note landmarks; curse the climb'. The new sound, that of warplanes, insinuates itself into the poem by virtue of the alliterative 'Sharklike shoals slip', emphasizing its surreptitious approach, and furthermore pointing to the subtlety of the change wrought by war. Even after the final sounds have left the poem, the rich vowel sounds of the last line melodiously support the speaker's despair: 'None, none peals now, deep bells of love and pity.' Inverted repetition brings home the immediacy of his response:

> How Dante at what bitter distance bled

becomes

But bitterly, distantly, I bleed...

'Giotto's Campanile' has an obvious parallel in 'Karroo Town 1939'. In both poems existing order and beauty are challenged by the intruder, War. It is clear that Butler had gone a long journey into inhumanity by the time he arrived at the older symbol, the city of Florence. His despair is borne of disappointment, disillusionment, at finding the centre of civilization contaminated. And yet the city has not really changed: the circumstances are not what he had hoped they might be. It is, again, mankind for whom he grieves, but with compassion, not bitterness.

The interplay of past and present, spiritual degradation and enrichment, the dehumanising influence of war and the humanising recollection of home find an early climax in one of Butler's most complex poems, 'Elegy.' It is longer and grander in scale than any of his previous work. One is conscious of the poem's importance in the sense that it contains the culmination of some of the war themes discussed thus far. 'Elegy' concerns itself with the war-creature sketched out in earlier verse, and seems at first to be a predictable continuation of a recognizable theme. But it is far more than that.

A pronounced narrative element at once renders the poem different from its predecessors and contemporaries, and anticipates the strong, narrative strain characterizing later verse. In the present are unwound, coldly and without ceremony, the events of a friend's burial. But simultaneously the speaker relates a specific experience he and his friend shared in his youth. As this story is the more dominant, 'Elegy' amounts, rather surprisingly, to an emphatic restatement of the conviction found in the early 'Karroo Town 1939,' viz. that belonging defies even death. The poem moves even further back in time as the poet leans on the historical past of Africa, as he was to do more extensively in later poems, to find a metaphor.

In the first two stanzas we recognise the indifference to death as ten soldiers, standing around their friend's grave, find it impossible to bring 'A gentle gesture to a scene so stark.' The speaker's attitude is deliberately tough as he explains that they are trained to kill, not to reveal emotion: a musical metaphor underlines the theme of man reduced to mechanism:

> We're trained to kill in concert, expert hands
> At death's arpeggios, quite without art
> To stroke a cadence from our own taut strands,
> Nor measured beat to coax the common heart
> Towards, perhaps, one full cathartic chord.

Even the padre's eyes reveal 'Compassion exhausted.' Here Butler achieves an objectivity in his description of the bearers bringing the corpse, chiefly by concentrating on the physical effort of carrying such a heavy load:

> A weight so heavy that each inside wrist
> Is taut, a weight so dead that living arm
> Is stretched out stiff.

The body of his friend is callously dismissed:

> An outsize doll in a parcel, the human norm
> Trussed neatly at the knees, the waist, the nape.

As in 'Air Raid Before Dawn' the doll image adds anonymity.

The third stanza switches to the past tense, and there is an immediate change of mood. It is as though a different speaker has taken over. The alienated soldier of the first section is replaced by the young man he used to be. Bored indifference makes way for excitement as the speaker recalls, in vividly sensuous language, an occasion on which he and his friend went riding together; the poem 'explodes' into a Wordsworthian anecdote:

> Once as boys, while dawning mountains reared
> Their lamp-black paper-cuts against the east
> We rose, and cantered clear across the weird
> Scrub-scribbled spaces...

The metre is unchanged: iambic pentametre, rhyming alternately. Yet the verse now brims with vigour, as in

> Slack the reins hung
> Beneath our horses' necks; their pouring hooves
> Thundered dull in multiple rhythm or rung
> Sharp, for a second, on rock. A donga! Swerve?
> No, risk it, jump!

Butler's sensory equipment is fully operational:

> two red earth dams
> From which tromboning geese splash out to trace
> Great echoing arcs of sky, while brown-horned rams
> Face round with stupid strength and nervous ewes
> With silver muzzles sniff their crinkled lambs.

Movement, colour, sound, feeling, and a sense of physical transportation, of opening outwards, the opposite of the confined sensation achieved in the first part, already suggested in the first line, 'We ten, who focus in an arkward arc...' all set the scene for the revival of the 'mummy shape'. Reinstalled in his proper environment, the boy comes to life. He is addressed by the speaker in the second person; he is revitalised in dynamic images:

> O the loose, then taut
> Poise of your balancing body as you move
> Centaur knit........
> Life's pivot to the blue horizons rims!

But the question of belonging drives the speaker to the problem of the poem, boldly stated in stark antitheses:

> Smoothe dolorite and rippled sandstone reared
> His young blood to the sun: the goblet lies
> Split in a landscape that Etruscans cleared.
> His home was treeless veld beneath bare skies;
> Smothered in damp leaves, he met his end
> As nightfall smudged the sharpness of his eyes.

The youth's belonging is unquestionable; he is as much part of his environment as the servant girl, and the farmers in

'Karroo Town 1939'. But he now lies in alien soil. This is the problem of the poem, a problem which leads the poet into his first substantial confrontation of the 'tension between Europe and Africa.' Here the narrative is broken off, and the question is taken up. The note of lyricism is replaced with a tentative, philosophictone, the pentametre taking on a ponderous character: 'In all of us two continents contend.' As in 'Giotto's Campanile', Butler seeks his metaphor in the historical past, in this case the writings of the Portuguese poet, Luis de Camoens, in particular the poem 'The Lusiads,' the story of Da Gama's travels to the East. The speaker is struck by the composite nature of the poet's writings:

> Whose heroes, traced from Troy, may strut and prance
> Through Lisbon, Malind; whose Grecian sun
> Lights Benin's Bay and Goa in a glance.

But the 'tempered personal bitterness' of Camoens's account of how many corpses Da Gama had to bury on 'our alien shore' leaves the speaker with the conviction:

> That bones lie best in lands where their hearts belong.

This parallel situation certainly makes the point clearly, but does not allay the speaker's own bitterness at the loss and 'alien' burial of his friend. He finds sardonic satisfaction in such lines as:

> To hide a hero from corrupting air
> Use any hill or wave upon the sea.

Cynically he considers how the accoutrements of a proper funeral - 'avenues of mourners', 'lace, white or blue,' 'Boy choristers' - may 'ease the brutish way' we are committed to soil or sea. But what it cannot ease, or cure, is our 'instinct for self-banishment'. This concept deserves careful

consideration. In identifying with Camoens, Butler clearly sees himself as the singer who lauds the acts of conquering heroes in foreign lands, but at the same time mourns the very fact of their removal from their native soil, their 'instinct for self-banishment' from his 'vision city,' and, in a wider sense, man the war-creature's banishment from the human race, which is an instinctive tendency.

Returning to the narrative, the poem moves into South Africa's past as the speaker recalls how he and his friend argued about whose people had prior claim to the land on which they rode. They were, in fact, repeating history, 'Disputing on the old disputed frontier'. They came upon a grave, 'centering the veld for miles around', and immediately fell silent, and when a jingling bridle broke the silence, he knew that they had, in a few minutes, grown separate, 'sundered, singled'. They were 'ashamed as if that grave had proved/Our day - long yarn all vain'. The gravity of all their talk of pioneering and possession pales to insignificance beside the immensity of this anonymous death. The speaker is struck by the thought of death's solitude:

> It shocks
> Me still, stock-still: death is so alone.

Thus the dead are able to affect the living - the past intrudes on the present, the one affecting, altering, re-interpreting the other. As the two friends returned they had to cross a few pools. The speaker notes how ripples caused by their crossing splashed and wet the 'ripple-marks from God-knows-what dead days' set in the stone walls of the pools. This image provides a metaphor for the concept of the inter-play of past and present. The poet sees a point where these blur, or melt. The same image informs the speaker's next observation; hoisted back to the present, fully human now in contrast to the inhuman speaker of the first stanza, he weeps for his dead

friend. Thus living and dead again meet, become complementary. The speaker now feels strangely confused, 'Directionless', as though he has been alienated from all he knew. His contact with the 'infinite absurd' of death has granted a new perspective, one in which self has been taken up into something greater. The allusion to Narcissus clarifies the point: Narcissus saw only his reflection, himself that is. The speaker, in renouncing nature, has relinquished man's tendency for self-love; everything he does, thinks, says is 'mirrored in the infinite absurd'. Yet he cannot explain why it should hurt to hear 'a darkling lark/Carol as she climbs'. The poem ends with an apology, a hope to place the young man back into his natural surroundings, and a gentle reproach of his friend who, unlike Narcissus who sees only himself, and unlike the speaker who sees only his own insignificance, has 'no echo until Kingdom come.'

Two short stanzas of 'Elegy', which have intentionally been overlooked, will be examined more closely as being representative of the best and the worst in Butler at this time. The first begins cryptically:

> In all of us two continents contend;
> Two skies of stars confuse us, on our maps
> The long - and latitudes contort and rend
> Our universe to twenty-acre scraps.

The image of 'two continents' is a typical Butler thought, probably a reference to the tension between Africa and Europe present in English speaking South Africans. The image is misleading in this context, however, as there can be no question of 'two continents' contending in the speaker's friend, who clearly is not an English-speaking South African, but an Afrikaner as is evident elsewhere in the poem: 'I saw the trek in you'. Butler's prose works contain references to the fact that the Afrikaner has a strongly developed national

pride: there is only one continent in his life. Butler continues the metaphor in his reference to 'skies of stars' and 'maps'. The logical connection between the 'two continents' and 'the twenty-acre scraps' is not clear. It seems that Butler is saying that although whole continents control our lives, our 'universe' is actually only a 'twenty-acre' scrap; that is all we know. The following line draws attention to the difference between the speaker and his friend: they are 'poles apart', a reference to the continent metaphor again, except that it adds to the confusion as it implies that in each of them a different continent contends, causing the difference between them. Despite this difference, the poem continues, they nevertheless enjoyed some common ground: admiring 'a major work of art', for instance, and being surprised at the peace it could bring.

Butler speaks of the work of art's ability to 'cut calm orbits through Man's cloudy heart', an image that is in keeping with the geographical theme of the imagery of the stanza, but is logically remote. The word 'orbits' is a strange choice, particularly as it is followed by the preposition 'through'. 'Man's cloudy heart' probably refers to the suffering brought about by war. Again, the logical connection between 'orbit' and 'heart' has not been made. Butler has clouded the issue by his preference for a metaphysical brand of imagery that is the fruit of thought rather than observation. This style is not characteristic of this period; in fact, the stanza jars even in the context of the poem of which it is part. The Butler of this period may be identified in the following few lines from 'Elegy':

> I wish you slept where grey mimosas churn
> Cream pollen on small footpaths, or where tall
> Red aloes, winter's candelabras, burn
> On every hill; where, once the spring rains fall,
> The silken freesia from its silver stem
> Might swing a censer for your burial.

Here Butler has relied on his senses, and is relying on ours, to work for understanding. The very names 'mimosas', 'aloes', 'freesia' are in themselves sufficient to conjure up the Karroo scene he wants us to see: 'Grey', 'cream', 'red', 'silver'. But we have also to hear the picture - 'the spring rains fall' - and to smell the freesia's 'censer', to stroke the freesia's 'silver' texture. Alliteration suggests the sound of rain, and adds a delicate fragility most appropriate to the theme of death. Paradoxically, the scene is one of life in death; for although the subject of these lines is his friend's final resting place, the natural activity described suggest spring-activity, eg. the words 'churn' and 'burn'. The busy countryside would not allow him to lie insensitive to her beauty. The business of the poem as a whole is caught in these few lines.

The structure of 'Elegy' is an important pointer to its meaning. The poem moves freely between past and present, and as already shown between the living and the dead. As a general rule, the present tense sections tell the story of his friend's burial, while the past tense sections recall his life. Further, the present deals with death, the past with life. This distinction blurs as the poem progresses. In the past lay the discovery of the dead - the grave - mound - while in the present, the development is towards life in death. The theme of the poem is the effect of the dead on the living. Through recognition of death, the speaker is able to gain a new perspective on life: understanding the past makes it possible to interpret the present and future. This is, in essence, what the poem says, but not explicitly. The structure of the poem is such that the reader is led to this thought. It is the artifice of the poem that does the talking, not the poet. Sections in the past, which are thoughts of and about life, continually interact with sections in the present which deal with death, thus refining the reader's grasp of death. The poem is the solution of its problem: it is what it is about.

In 'Elegy' the speaker's anxiety to return his friend to the country of his birth betrays Butler's pre-occupation with the concept of belonging. About a year later the poet found an embodiment of that most pitiable form of alienation: that of lacking a place 'in a particular geographic and historical setting.' 'Cape Coloured Batman' is impersonal in tone, yet the coloured batman's plight is personally felt by the poet. The batman is not much different from the English-speaking South African whom Butler discusses at length in his essays and lectures: both are composite beings, both lack a strong sense of belonging, and both are largely indifferent to this particular aspect of their predicament. It is this fact which is ultimately responsible for the poem's generally acclaimed success, for the poet understands his subject, and treats him in a genuinely sympathetic manner.

'Cape Coloured Batman' is set in Italy. The speaker, an army officer, finds his coloured batman, Nelson, sitting beneath an olive tree. Nelson is drunk and giving vent to his feelings in song, accompanied by the strumming of a banjo, 'over his knees'. The speaker feels a 'tenderness' for Nelson. There is even an element of envy in the speaker's tone: 'all his body, relaxed, at ease', and 'So happy his sorrow, so at ease'. In six neatly rhymed triplets Butler sketches Nelson's colourful ancestry, laying bare the composite nature of his being, concluding,

> This is the man the Empires made
> From lesser breeds, the child of Trade
> Left without hope in History's shade.

For Nelson has no place, belongs nowhere, yet everywhere. His universality in his curse. Of course, he is not aware of this 'great disgrace': his desperate pursuit of pleasure is his subconscious remedy. As he lies 'asleep in a vinous

mist', he seems to the speaker to be strangely elevated, for his is 'the pathos of the human race'; his plight is universal, and the wind which stirs the banjo strings brings 'sorrows from the Seven Seas.'

Technically 'Cape Coloured Batman' is an early triumph for Butler. The poem's lilting tetrameter and melodious rhyme scheme create a song-like quality most appropriate to the subject. The strumming of the banjo, the chief motif in the poem, can be heard all the way through. Successful too is the tidy implementation of triplets in which, step by step, Nelson's roots are uncovered. This section of the poem, though tightly confined in form, thrusts the imagination of the reader out into vast terrains, evoked by exotic names:

> No doubt a pirate Javanese
> From Malacca Straits or Sunda Seas
> Shaped those almond eyes of his;
>
> A Negress from the Cameroons -
> Bought for brandy, sold for doubloons -
> Gave him a voice that wails and croons;
>
> An eagle Arab trading far
> From Hadramaut to Zanzibar
> Left him a nose like a scimitar;
>
> A Bush-girl from the Namaqua sands
> Bequeathed him bird-like, restless hands
> Stirring his sorrow from four steel strands;

Metre and rhyme combine to create the musical effect which helps to evoke a sense of nostalgia, thereby heightening the batman's alienation.

Effective too is the poet's use of repetition in establishing the music-motif. 'Head thrown back while over his knees' finds echoes in 'Strumming the strings across his knees', and 'Drunk crooning voices, banjos on knees', and finally 'Touched mute strings across his knees.' So too, 'Stirred all his sorrow from four steel strands' is echoed by 'Stirring his sorrow from four steel strands.' These 'refrains' support the song-like quality of the poem.

'Cape Coloured Batman' does have its precedent. In an early little epic, 'The Last Trekker', the character portrayed is also alien, but by choice. He refuses to belong, to settle and strike root:

> No fertile valley, mill-wheel under oak
> Could hold him.

He keeps his 'freedom unconquered', is forever on the move, seems always to be taking a hand in the affairs of others:

> You'll find him in the waste places, the deserts.
> Ovomboland, the Caprivi, or crossing into Angola
> A living legend, a ghost, a blonde phenomenon.
> Among the dark-skinned, settled Portuguese.

The similarity is there, though slight. Both poems reveal Butler's attraction to the man who belongs nowhere, or everywhere. There are, of course, important differences. The most significant of these is the speaker's tone, for whilst the speaker in 'Cape Coloured Batman' reveals a 'tenderness', the speaker in 'The Last Trekker' is clearly awed by this phenomenon, unable to understand it and yet attracted to it.

As the end of the war approached, so Butler's thoughts turned from war to love. Characteristic of the poems written in Ireland and England in 1945-46, is the fact that none of them seem particularly comforting, or even mildly cheerful.

There is a depressed and numb spirit moving behind the lines. The war is in fact not over - it lives on in the poet's verse, even in his love poems. The technique frequently employed by Butler of associating man with Nature here takes on a special significance: it occurs as an analogy of man's spiritual condition and the vast workings of the seasonal cycle. We have noted earlier implementations of the metaphor in poems like 'Syrian Spring', 'On the Brink', 'Three Glances At One Photograph,' and particularly 'Bitter Little Ballad.' The motif is central to two poems on the subject of lovers parting. 'Farewell In a Formal Garden,' set on a November day beside the Thames, is built on contrast:

> The hard beside
> The soft...

The soft is that which is cloaked in mist, the 'fog's thick smother,' and the hard is that which is clearly visible, or suddenly revealed, by parting fog. The use of mist or fog as a concealer or revealer of the truth recurs in several of the poems mentioned above in which the weather plays an important role, notably in 'Letter from Mante Stanco', 'December 1944,' and 'On First Seeing Florence'. In 'Farewell in a Formal Garden' it is the mist that causes the contrast. Thus, the 'Damp blue gravel, a blackened rose', 'hedges of box' whose 'parallel run/Halts at the solid paws and locks of two bronze lions....' are clearly visible; but the 'farther trees', are 'Invisible', the river is 'indefinite'. The speaker sees the end of their relationship in terms of the year's wintry death:

> My love, so we
> At this particular year's
> Normal, inevitable dying,
> Dissolve in mists, fade, cease to be,
> Only to meet those nerve-trees frosted with tears
> And hail-hard words across a breeze of sighing.

Thus the poem returns to the contrast, now personally felt: the lovers' parting is easy; they simply 'Dissolve in mists.' But contrasted with this soft parting, is the harshness of what will follow: 'nerve-trees frosted with tears,' 'hail-hard words', 'a breeze of sighing'. These wintry emblems represent pain or suffering of some kind. They seem real, in contrast to the 'fading' described above. In 'Aubade' separation is forced upon the lovers: they wait upon the morning which shall

> ... damn each heart
> To different stations

Time is the enemy:

> The mantle clock
> Shall soon despatch on jack-boot feet
> Indifferent thugs to force me back.

As in 'Farewell in a Formal Garden,' the end of their relationship is pictured in terms of winter;

> ...and the loves of two
> Like insects left on the yellowing lawns
> Die in the weathers that freeze and rend.

Their bodies are trees stripped,

> ...naked, zero-gripped,
> Birdless, black; its living dress
> Lie stiff in cold, stopped streams .

They will be doomed to live 'in opposites of weather,' separated from each other by 'great gales'. The speaker is gripped by despair, which is portrayed in images of winter, as in this stanza:

> Look through the curtains. Our lover's moon
> Has lost her broken ring in the mist
> Each lamp's a nightmare place,
> A wet tar-stage where limp leaves twist
> In sad little ballets devoid of grace
> To scraping winds that know no tune.

The same motif occurs in two small love-poems written at about the same time in Ireland. The first of these, 'Moment in Kerry', is an uncollected poem:

Moment in Kerry

Treeless Acoose Lake lay like quick-silver under
The unrusted iron of Carrantouhill
As down, down through the sunlight we slid with the thunder
Muttering thick through the following rain, until
Over the ale-coloured stream, beyond the bare-footed boys
Solemn and proud beside their six small speckled trout,
At once we were aware of a shift in the weather's noise,
The shadows all joined into one, and sun went out.
Over grey trees, grey hills, grey water
The grey rain slanting fell, stinging the still-warm face,
Ringing the sea-sunk bells, round the rocks of our shelter
And shaking the crone-old hawthorn, lifting her Sunday lace.

Sad under veils of the shower, remembering how all
Loves will be ending in ruin and hate,
O how we were lifted to laughter when tall
The rainbow arose beyond the boreen gate:
All the colours of all the earth and the seasons
Burnt in our eyes and the valley then.
Our triumph, more splendid than Caesar's granted for reason
Unguessed: perhaps, as the ark-old promise to men,
More likely a hint that love is a trick of the weather,
That hearts that are drinking each other's wine till they're mad
Should mind how it's nothing but luck that carries the feather
Green and blue down wind to the red and yellow bud.

The 'shift in the weather's noise' is responsible for the shift in the lovers' mood. The weather darkens, becomes increasingly 'grey' until it rains. Not only does the rain make them 'sad', but it also reminds them of how love always has an unhappy ending. The rainbow causes a fleeting moment of happiness, for the speaker seems now to have realized that love, like the rainbow, is nothing but 'a trick of the weather.' This seems in fact to be his somewhat cynical view of love: 'it's nothing but luck.' A similar mood permeates in 'Watching The Seed-Grass,' a poem in which two lovers, lying in the long grass, become isolated from their surroundings, aware only of the 'cool then warm waves' of air on their faces, and of the

seed-grass, shaking in the wind. Again, the weather becomes significant: the weather of their special world never changes, while in the gorge below, the seasons continue to signal the passing time:

> Though the ephemeral flowing together
> Mean months, mean years in the gorge below
> Where frozen birds fall from the trees
> Beside dark pools.

Their world is, however, beyond change:

> Time for a moment is wrecked on these hills;
> We lie eternal, in shade, in sun.

And yet the speaker immediately challenges the claim he seems about to make. This very special situation is not unique:

> And our love, O my love, is it ours only
> Or the dream of everyone?

The season once again attains symbolic significance in one of the finest poems of this period, 'Stranger To Europe'. As is evident from the title, the poem returns to the theme of belonging, and more specifically to the tension between Africa and Europe. To the young soldier, ever conscious of the search for his 'northern origins',[14] visiting Britain must have been an event of some importance. Yet initially there is no question of belonging: quite the opposite in fact. 'Stranger To Europe' was first published as 'Exile', a title which clearly stressed the speaker's 'foreignness' to this land of his origin which he was now visiting. The first line clearly underlines this fact:

> Stranger to Europe, waiting release...

He does not know Europe, even less Ireland. He knows 'a

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14) 'On First Seeing Florence', New Coin, (Grahamstown, 1968), p4.

bird or a tree' only 'as an exiled name,' probably heard often enough at home in the Karroo. But 'That afternoon' something would happen, an experience through which mere names would escape their word-prisons and assume sensuously real proportions:

> ...an exiled name, could cease
> As such, take wing and, trembling, shoot
> Green light and shade through the heart of me.

The speaker is taken on a garden tour by an unnamed guide. Their initially formal relationship soon makes way for a direct, intimate honesty where the speaker wants more than mere names:

> Customary veils and masks had dropped.
> Each looked at the hidden other in each.

The 'knotty hedge' suggests the barrier between the speaker and the land. Various plants and trees are pointed out to him, but 'Tell me more', the speaker insists.

The season now gains significance: wind drives 'sapless leaves' into 'the bonfire of the sun', thunder clouds cover the 'black bare hills of Kerry' turning them into 'giant graves' entombing the dying land. Thus the theme of death, the autumnal death of the year is introduced. Words, naming flowers and shrubs, fall impotent onto 'the stubble and the sheaves.' And, as though the promise of spring which the land takes for granted applies to him too, the speaker's experience becomes a physical reality which consumes its prison of words and strikes a chord in his being, awakening a love long felt but not realized:

> As if the trees and clouds had grown
> Into a timeless flame that burnt
> All worlds of words and left them dust
> Through stubble and sedge by the late wind blown:
> A love not born and not to be learnt
> But given and taken, an ultimate trust.

Years later the speaker still feels the immediacy of the scene, still sees 'Black hills meet moving skies;' the hedges are barriers no longer, for 'the late wind', previously an agent of death, now blows through them.

> And in my palm through all the rages
> Of lust and death now, always, lie
> Brown hawthorn berry, red dogrose.

The most fully developed implementation of the weather-motif occurs in the long uncollected poem 'Winter Solstice', one of Butler's most complex statements of his spiritual condition:

Winter Solstice

> No towers under Orion, no given kiss
> Wine by candlelight or midnight waltz
> Will bridge this insulating night's abyss
> Between me and delight; nor dull the pulse
> Drumming it morse to death. Not these, nor the guns'
> Staccato jerk at dusk will ever convulse
> Me back to longing for love, watching for dawns.
>
> Since the winter of my guilt congealed the world
> There is no joy or pain. Though it stuns
> The singer in my throat, fetters the unfurled
> Orchards of my heart, it keeps Sensation still,
> Staves off the cruel hour of being hurled
> Back to the pit of appetite, the shrill
> Accusing love left in a ditch to die.
>
> Dead midnight of the year, seize and hold my will.
>
> . . . .
>
> Dawn leers. The ashen iris of her eye
> Stares through ragged lids of cloud and hill
> On trees and towers stiff against the sky.
> Against my guilt each cold devoted bell
> Will clamour with harangueing tongue, round which
> Rancid December air swirls with the smell
> Of rotting leaves. Insensate to the rich
> Never-shaking scent of Love's frost-bitten flower
> Basalt loins will mock me from their niche.

Relentless, the shadows lessen: chilled, I cower
From the bold eye that strikes the winter-stripped
Stem-skeletons, enduring their derelict hour,
So sure of artesian sap. O I am gripped
In all-year guilt, black bark in every season,
Neutral between plucked fruit and flame-tipped
Bud on the late frost bursting! Mine the treason
Of corn that would not die, the metal will
That flowered into guns; and this the reason
Why quivering dreams of spring are hell,
Making me drum short messages to Death:
Garotte green conscience in the dark! Quell
The sea-weed shudder, smother the insect breath!
And I'll stay dumb! This day's confessional
I'll cry no creed of Spring.

Old fingers seized
Smoothe cords in shining towers. Wild madrigals
Of iron burst on buildings and bare trees,
Bronze descants to shaken bone and dust
And chastened voices chant from bended knees.
Tenderly now, across earth's dormant crust
Echo, bell and voice implore: Deny
Your dreamt escape from human love and lust:
Through these and through the round year's liturgy
Speaks God, now born as Man. Even within
The ice-fields of your heart He shall not die.

I give no answer. Firm I stand, my sin
Wrapped purple round me; I face the great 'I AM',
Dumb, blind, quivering under the din
Of a dead myth's third degree.
The damning rhyme
Dissolves in silence, silence where I spin
A feather through great vortices of Time
Grinding to a stop. Earth's wheel steadies in
A socket cold and worn. The guns are dumb.
The trees are stone and mute the violin
Beside the heart's abandoned, flaccid drum.

And here is Peace. Over this lucid ice
Nor yearling heifer nor garland girl shall come,
Priest-led, to the pompous sacrifice
Or the hysterical dance. Isiah's brow
Is marble-smoothe. Hamlet, Oedipus
Forget the cursing womb, deaf to the slow
Dead march and faked transfiguring: at last
Pity and Love are useless. To printless snow
No mystic cries: Be Merciful and Just:
No blush of blood; no limb lies slack
In the warmth of women or glow of suns: fast
In the glacier's grip is the dancer, the terrible, black
Dionysus.

> And here I discover my soul,
> The hoar-frost of my heart, feel love's lack
> Despatch grey blizzards to the human Pole
> Where hangs a green Spring God, enduring still,
> Ice-nailed, frost-crowned, unquenchable coal.

The stuntedness of feeling in the few love-poems dating from this period is accounted for in 'Winter Solstice'. Indeed, the theme of alienation from mankind brought about the war seems to find its climax here, for the speaker here is clearly experiencing his spiritual winter solstice, 'frozen' in a condition of neither joy nor sadness. Both romance and war, two sources of 'excitement' which Butler has in fact frequently contrasted, are summarily dismissed:

> No towers under Orion, no given kiss,
> Wine by candlelight...nor the guns'
> Staccato jerk at dusk will ever convulse
> Me back to longing for love, watching for dawns.

His indifference is expressed in natural terms, or, in the words of Gwill Owen, 'Butler has seen himself in a distorted landscape which is the mirror of his soul.'[15] Thus 'the unfurled/ Orchards of my heart' are fettered; he is 'Neutral between plucked fruit and flame-tipped/Bud....' Replacing the miracle of daybreak described in 'Common Dawn' are the following distortions: 'Dawn leers,' the 'iris of her eye' is 'ashen', the clouds and hills are 'ragged lids', a 'smell of rotting leaves' swirls through 'Rancid December air'; trees are reduced to 'winter stripped stem-skeletons.'
The origin of the speaker's 'seasonal pause' is at first only vaguely hinted at. He mentions guilt:

> Since the winter of my guilt...

and,

> Against my guilt each cold devoted bell
> Will clamour...

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15) 'Oxford Poetry Today' in <u>The Oxford Viewpoint</u>, (Oxford, 1947), p13.

and again:

O I am gripped
In all year guilt, black bark in every season...

He names his crime:

Mine the treason
Of corn that would not die, the metal will
That flowered into guns...

The vagueness gives way to clarity: war has turned him into the indifferent non-being characterised in so many of the poems already discussed. Trees, though they be mere 'stem-skeletons', endure the winter, for they are 'sure of Artesian sap.' Not so the soldier, whose 'metal will' grotesquely flowers into guns, who has consummated his 'escape from human love and lust.' Religion directs appeals, delivers the promise:

Even within
The ice-fields of your heart He shall not die.

But the poet stands firm, 'wrapped' in his 'sin'. Finally, with 'Time/Grinding to a stop', and as

Earth's wheel steadies in
A socket cold and worn

peace descends. A mocking echo of Keats denies religion any further opportunity:

On this humid ice
Nor yearling heifer no garlanded girl shall come,
Priest-led, to the pompous sacrifice...[16]

All feeling remains dead:

Pity and love are useless.
. . . . . .
No blush of blood; no limb lies slack
In the warmth of women or glow of suns...

16) An echo of these lines from Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn':
Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?

But there is hope. Butler hints at the possibility of an awakening, by using the myth of the fertility god, Dionysus, the God who dies and is born again:[17]

> ...fast
> In the glacier's grip is the dancer, the terrible, black Dionysus.

The speaker's refusal of life is expressed in terms of the myth:

> Mine the treason
> Of corn that would not die...

The corn must die to be reborn: the Corn God must die to ensure fertility.[18] The allusion serves to strengthen the man/Nature intimacy evident in so many of these early poems. The conclusion here, allegorically, provides the hope that, if the 'green Spring God' - associated with Christ by the words 'Ice-nailed' and 'frost-crowned' - is 'enduring still' and is 'unquenchable', the speaker's awakening from his 'winter solstice' will follow.

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17) P. Harvey (Ed): The Oxford Companion to English Literature, (London, Oxford University Press, 1953) p226.

18) J.G. Fraser: The Golden Bough: A study in Magic and Religion, (London, Macmillan, 1963), p497.

'On First Seeing Florence'

'On First Seeing Florence' stands midway in Butler's poetic oeuvre, looking both backwards and forwards. In many respects the poem is a consummation of early thoughts and techniques. It is the most extended application of the central metaphor of the war poems, viz. the metaphor drawn from natural environment. The poem deals deliberately with the problem of belonging, being a purposeful search for origins; it is thus directly concerned with the Africa/Europe conflict, and is an attempt to reconcile this conflict. The poem is also a blend of several styles of writing: there is the sensuously descriptive verse, evident in the war poetry, and there is also the abstract, philosophic poetry observed in 'Elegy'. Contrast, a technique associated with Butler's earlier verse is extensively employed. Finally, parts of the poem are in terza rima, a form associated with Butler's early verse. In other respects, the poem looks towards that which is to come. Juxtaposed with the symbol from nature is the use of artefact as symbol. This more abstract framework, together with the increasingly philosophic style Butler has used, indicates leanings towards his longer poems, such as 'Livingstone Crosses Africa' and 'Home Thoughts,' which are almost exclusively written in this style. In sheer length, too, the symphonic 'On First Seeing Florence' has only pseudo-rivals, but these belong to the post-war period. Finally, the chief themes of the poem, belonging, and the Africa/Europe tension, is shortly to be taken up in the long poems of the early fifties.

'On First Seeing Florence' is an extremely important poem. Its importance to Butler is evident from the fact that it was finally published in complete form twenty-four years after it was conceived. During this time the poem was rewritten and expanded three times. In his 'Author's Note' Butler explains:

'...it is now as adequate a treatment of the experience as I shall manage.'[19] The writing of the poem spans nearly three decades. Yet it has been placed in the year of its birth, in keeping with the general principle outlined in the Introduction to this thesis, p2 .

To place the poem anywhere else would be to ignore the impact that first seeing Florence had on the young poet. He already knew Florence, second-hand, as it were, in much the same way as he knew Ireland before he came to write 'Stranger to Europe'. In a mystical, unverified way, Florence was 'home' to Butler: seat of the renaissance of all he stood for; author of the paintings and sculptures which, though only in books, adorned his everyday existence; home of Dante; and also Butler's Northern home. Artefact moved the young man to artefact of his own making in which the city becomes a metaphor for his European identity.

The poem opens dramatically as the poet, in terse, vividly sensuous phrases, sketches puny man floundering under attack from both 'heavy guns' and 'drenching rain':

> Earth shakes, spine jerks, eyes flicker to the flash
> of heavy guns; tense as a dog's ears strain
> for the obliterating salvo's crash
>
> upon our bivouac; but once again
> it crumps far left. Dun gleam on tank and truck,
> on dark tents taut from midnight's drenching rain...

The speaker is not the emotionally defunct, spiritually numbed creature of the war-poems. This speaker is excited by the prospect of catching 'a first look at Dante's town'; he has the sensitivity to respond to 'long wooded slopes', 'scented labyrinths' of trees, 'soft mauve cirrus.' His impatience to see Florence is conveyed in questions:

> How soon through the cool
> White-quilted mist will the hidden city break?

19) 'On First Seeing Florence', inside cover.

The observation of 'formal hosts of trees' initiates an important motif in the poem: the trees are pines and poplars, the pines masculine and military, in 'massive phalanxes', 'spear straight', while the poplars are feminine, 'loose-robed', 'each poised to wheel and prance in the slightest breeze -'. Butler uses these pines and poplars as symbols of the speaker's belonging, since they become the vehicles for his return to his home. Their contrasting natures further symbolise the speaker's dual nature, as will be seen later. As the speaker studies them, he seems almost to expect them to 'catch alight', begin to sparkle with 'live history': he trusts in the power of the imagination and of the mind to transform ordinary objects 'from public day' into symbols. Soon, as the mind grasps some 'inner' significance, the trees cease to be mere trees, but become 'vast presences', able to 'send their minor chords vibrating through my brain'; able also to send the speaker's thoughts 'half over earth's unending round', home in fact. The house, like the lake, is surrounded with pines and poplars. So strong is the recollection that he is able to enter 'behind the shutters', as the poem moves into the past. The stately terza rima of Section One is traded for a more loosely organised trimeter, less certainly rhymed. This less formal style serves the subject, as this section concerns home. The speaker recalls occasions on which he, as a child, would lose interest in the adults' 'usual range' of topics of conversation -'politics and sport'- and his mind would gradually lose its grip on his surroundings so that the 'photograves of sculpture' on the walls would leave the prisons of their frames and seem to float free, cease to be artefacts, and appear to be truly alive. In the company of such works of art, Rodin's 'Thinker', 'Demetrius', 'Apollo Belvedere', 'David', a water-colour landscape by 'old great uncle John', the speaker feels he might easily have considered painting as a career were it not for the steadying influence of

religion, 'the Bible and such laws as a man must needs fulfil', the subject to which the adult conversation usually returned. He was impressed by the conviction in their eyes, the fact that 'trust in the power God was living.' This section provides the spiritual basis for the speaker's search for his identity. These works of art 'which assure a man/that he is not alone' provide the spark which will ignite the flame. God cannot provide the absolute that he seeks - God can provide security only.

The brief Section lll polarizes 'outer and inner' forces; the 'outer eye' may notice change, the body may sense tension, but the catalysis cannot be forced:

> The eye drifts over the mist, the pool, the trees,
> and the mind drifts back to nostalgic analyses.

Section lV is a nostalgic analysis of the past, as the speaker recalls an early spring morning when he and his mother watched the swallows, newly returned 'from overseas.' The sight did, indeed, force a catalysis, awakening his envy for the birds to whom 'Norfolk Broads', 'the Serpentine', and 'Crummock Waters' were more than 'names, mere names'. The speaker recalls his determination to seek his European identity:

> some day for sure I'd sever
> whatever held me back
> from my northern origins.

But he is immediately struck with feelings of guilt and led to the impelling question:

> Was a hunger to see the world
> one of the deadly sins?

His conscience leads him to rationalize his desires at this point: his 'hunger' is clearly not the 'normal' drive to 'see the world'. He wants to see a very specific part of the world; and then not as a tourist, but specifically to see how much of himself remains there. This 'white lie' betrays

his anxiety at this point. For he is also of southern origin. The thought of severing his African ties horrifies him. We recognize, in fact see a working example of the 'tension between Europe and Africa.' The youth, unwittingly it appears, compares himself to the poplar, and slowly our understanding of the significance of the tree-symbol grows:

> I wrapped my stripling flesh
> in tapestries of gold
> which shimmers with each movement.

His mind, meanwhile, is pre-occupied with images from some romantic legend: 'a drowsy dragon', 'the blushing snow of Anadyomene's limbs'.

Section V expands into full pentameter, as the sense too expands into a reflective discussion of the problem raised in Section 1V. Section V consists of nine strictly organised stanzas, each contructed on the same pattern viz. one quatrain, also alternately rhymed. These stanzas are like sonnets, for each confines itself to a single aspect of the argument. In this section past and present interact: past experiences throw light on the present. Full understanding is, however, still veiled. As in 'Letter from Monte Stanco' and 'December 1944,' the mist in 'On First Seeing Florence' enacts the speaker's failure to perceive the truth. In Section 1 the city was hidden below 'white-quilted mist.' Section 111 begins with the observation that 'the mist/thins at the fringes'. In Section V 'Mists move below,' but still nothing is seen. The 'eunuch' speaker, on the one hand bound to his place of birth, and on the other hankering 'a little yet/for antique shapes of passion and despair', calls on the trees to prod his memory into action:

> You're welcome to stir whatever Lazarus
> lies wrapped in my limboed flesh: dark Tuscan pine,
> and light-leafed poplar, glimmering nacreous,
> come summon your shadows lost below the line.

Memory obliges, and again the image of the trees is broadened as the difference between them is more clearly defined. Here the poplar's femininity and changability are stressed: the spectacle of her leaves, 'silver to green', of summer she would change into a 'loose kimono of gold' and 'stained glass' for autumn, finally becoming 'stark fish-skeletons.' The pine, on the other hand, offers **permanence and endurance:** no extremes of weather 'could shift the fine-spun chain-mail from the pine.' The pine's 'credo of restraint' does, however, have little appeal for 'a young boy's heart' whereas the poplar could 'scatter idolatry'; she was a 'pagan saint/to all the restless peasants in his blood.' The full significance of these symbols is now apparent: they represent contrasting aspects of the speaker's nature. The poplars symbolise reckless, whimsical, adventure-seeking tendencies, while the pines represent resistance to change, a stubborn clinging to the past, and a sense of rooted belonging. The pine drops its 'long-secluded shining seeds;' not only does it intend no change; it intends to stay there. Thus Butler finds a metaphor for the conflict within the speaker in the trees that flank him as he waits for his first glance of Florence.

The speaker continues to consider the danger of forgetting his country and his people:

> ...the long dirt roads
> naked of any legend, beasts unset
> in shield or song; forget my people's loads
> of loneliness, of unacknowledged needs,
> long winds of exile...

These lines echo the lament of the essayist: 'not one popular ballad to cover their cultural nakedness.'[20] The speaker reverts to myth to describe his parting from his people, comparing it with Hector parting from Anadyomene before his last battle. He recalls, too, how he was always attracted to

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20) See page 13 of this thesis.

'such legendary roads,' was always sensitive to miracles of mythology. But Africa always asserted herself in the bark of the jackal, the sight of a cobra squirming under a boulder, a black face wincing, and then he could feel only 'stark exposure' and 'raggedness of heart', the isolation of sleeping in a tent in vast expanses of veld, of existing in vast expanses of cultural poverty.

The speaker's reverie is broken by a breeze which moves the trees, disturbs the 'pool glint'; but in the 'inner pool' of his mind he sees himself, a boy again, watching a 'disintergrating rose', ignorant of his own growing up and loss of a sense of belonging.

The boy had no way of foreseeing this present situation, where he has become 'sundered, hungry for miracles', unable to raise an echo from 'cliff or lips.'

At this point in the poem echoes from the speaker's past cease. Butler has, piecemeal, established the nature of his eunuch. He is a boy, steeped in the romance of classical myth and legend, constantly 'lost in a book'; a boy whose adolescent growth was nurtured by Renaissance works of art, works created in vastly different times from those which influenced his own home; a boy hungry for adventure, more specifically the kind of adventure that would lead him to his northern origins; and finally, a boy who experienced Africa as a vast, impersonal force, asserting itself in savage ways. Such was the nature of this young man, who sat impatiently awaiting the dawn, the lifting of the veil of mist, to reveal Dante's city.

Stanza Vl echoes the beginning of the poem: 'Earth shakes...' We are back in the present, back to terza rima. It is as though the poem were beginning afresh, but with a difference. There is something familiar about the speaker, who cynically compares 'one's dream of Man' to 'this sweat-cold skin stretched

taut on a skeleton.' In grim contrast to the sensitive, complex individual portrayed thus far is placed this fear-ridden 'skin on a skeleton', desperately pressing himself close to earth, waiting breathlessly for death. But as he opens his eyes, and his fear diminishes 'at the kiss of sight', he notices the 'dark-skinned pine', the 'pale blue bark of poplar boles', and beyond, in the dawn, the city of Florence. He sees two stone towers, 'Steady as stakes in the mist's ebb tide', the towers of Arnolfo and Giotto. Viewing them through a maze of tree trunks, he associates them with the trees, 'designed and undersigned/cut stone, scarred bark' until they became one, 'closely intertwined'. The towers are as different from each other as the stems: Arnolfo, 'resounding trumpet-clear', has pine-like solidity, is 'a sundial of justice', an unchanging criterion of 'Jehova's might'; while the lighter-toned Giotto, like the colourful, bright poplar, 'raises colour to the Son', representing 'a hunger to atone.' Thus the conflicting elements of the speaker's life, earlier identified in the pine and poplar, are now found in the towers. The scene is set for the climax. The towers and trees are elevated until they 'float flaming in the legendary light', until the speaker himself seems loosened from the limitations of space and time and sees 'man, stone and tree stand stripped of all disguise'. This is the moment of vision, when 'seer and seen fuse in the arc of sight.' Thus, in the manner of one who is searching his mind for the right word, Butler arrives at his climax. This moment, this first glimpse of Florence, is the kernel round which the experience of the poem is built, and as such it is a highly complex experience.

Butler has carefully prepared the element of surprise by devoting the first eight stanzas of this section to a portrayal of man at his bestial worst: the war-creature of the war-poems. This has the effect of making the event seem all the more unexpected and incongruous, since it is essentially an experience concerning intellect, emotion, as well as spirit.

The 'vision' occurs in stages. The speaker, upon opening his eyes, sees pines and poplars, which immediately call to mind the vision of his child-hood. One realizes that this is a recurrence, or a re-interpretation of the same vision, fleshed out by adult experiences: the war, and the longing for home in particular. The towers are the trees, pointing to the dual nature of Man and of God. The dual-natured speaker/poet sees both 'Tower' and, 'tower', 'Tree' and 'tree', and for a moment is part of that very special scene, awed that here, 'half over earth's unending round', he should discover the same vision, the same truth.

In the following two sections the speaker attempts to come to grips with what has happened by providing metaphorical explanations. In Section V11 he uses a metaphor drawn from theatre. His feelings are those of the young actor who one night suddenly discovers the meaning of the play, sees the full significance of all its parts, including his own, 'nugatory rôle:'. The 'bit-part that he scorns' suddenly makes sense, and 'All is strict and clear.' He has seen a divine plan for man, and understands his rôle in its execution. Meanwhile dawn is transforming the city:

> ... dawn's artesian well
> filters a fountain freshness on the old
> facades of palaces...

Here Butler employs a weaving image: the palaces are described as standing 'as still/as those in tapestries.' Everything is motionless, except the sunlight, streaming 'fine-spun', 'in tactile forms off looms of water, gold/from Arno's weirs.' As time weaves the scene into a permanent tapestry, the speaker becomes part of the warp and woof:

> ... my own eyes seem
> woven forever in the texture of this hour,
> woven forever in the substance of this dream.

The image supports and elaborates on Butler's concept of time. His reverence for the past is clearly something more than a hankering after security, or 'good old days.' Here is underlined the fact that the present experiences are assimilated in terms of the past. To the fully alive, the past is always present, whereas the speaker of the war-poems found himself in a desperate situation partly because he was severed from his past. As does 'Elegy', 'On First Seeing Florence' features a continual interplay of past and present - present experiences are filtered through the past, just as here the 'fountain freshness ' of 'dawn's artesian well' is filtered on 'old façades of palaces': the present, the new, illuminates the past, or the old. In the weaving image, the speaker, at his most 'alive', commits the present to the past as he explains that his eyes seem 'woven forever in the texture of this hour.' In Section 1X he perceives time as something sensible, sees the bell heave, hears the plummet fall, sees waves of sound leave the bell to fragment the living day - perceives the old, the past, ordering the present.

His next words are direct pointers to an allusion, or analogy, which substantially affects the meaning of the entire poem. The speaker imagines himself to be Dante, lying on 'the steps' of 'purgatory', 'staring into heaven.' Earlier in the poem, in Section 1, Butler has left a suggestion that 'The Divine Comedy' was on his mind when he wrote 'On First Seeing Florence.' He mentions 'black hill's crest', the 'long, wooded slopes', 'dark pines'; Dante, too, begins his journey 'in a dark wood.' 21 Again, it is by means of the 'dark-stemmed pine' and 'pale blue bark' of the poplar that the speaker acquires his vision in Section V1 of the poem; they are the same trees as, and yet vastly different from, the trees in Section 1, having been transmuted by the imagination. Dante too, as a prelude to entering the Earthly Paradise in Book 2 of 'The Divine Comedy', passes through 'the Sacred Wood' 22 of which the editor says:

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21) Dante, A: The Divine Comedy, edited by Betty Radich and Robert Baldick, (London, Penguin, 1969), p71.

22) Ibid. Book 2, p289.

> We can scarcely doubt that he is making a parallel and contrast with the 'dark wood', the 'rough, stubborn, Forest', from which he set out upon his journey. [23]

But it is in the allegorical interpretation of 'The Divine Comedy' as a whole that the clearest point of analogy is to be found. The editors explain: 'His (Dante's) whole journey through Hell and Purgatory, is thus a return journey in search of his true starting place.' [24] This is precisely what 'On First Seeing Florence' is.

Section X returns to the swallows, as the speaker again compares his own half-understood compulsion to find his origin with the swallows' instinctive urge to migrate. He, like the swallows, should not stop to question what directs his ways, but simply accept 'the determined end.' He concludes, as Hamlet does, 'the readiness is all.'

In Section Xl, as the ringing of the bells dies down, it seems as though 'a continent disappears' - the bells, signifying 'the fragmentation/of the living day' now cease, leaving the time 'empty', the city 'frozen in the sun'. Nothing else remains. The speaker is again reminded of his swallows' instinct: 'like a bird I must/obey the swinging sun'.

In Section Xll the speaker renews his efforts to understand the experience he has undergone. He thinks of it as 'a Faustian trick', as sharing in 'a minor mystic's vision,' of unwittingly eavesdropping on the thoughts of 'a Shelley or a Blake'. Those meanderings do little more than stress the mysticism of the experience. Slipping back into 'the normal/sense of time and being' the speaker enjoys the physical pleasure of drawing 'deep breath', and is compared to a patient putting on his nightgown after a medical examination during which he was conscious of 'the considerate hands of death'. The experience was like a 'naked','cold-blooded'

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23) Ibid Book 2, p293.

24) Ibid Book 2, p293.

examination of his spirit, a self-examination. The lure of being taken and made part of the eternity he perceived is always present - but the speaker rejects the offer. He cannot banish death, but he can learn to cope with its imminence. He rejects Yeats's consolatory offer of 'a breathless eternity/ of intellect and art' as he emphatically asserts: 'I am in love with breath.'[25] This rejection of Yeatsian philosophy, as outlined in the Byzantium poems, again draws attention to the paradox perceived earlier. In Section VIII one could sense the unspoken appeal, '..gather me/Into the artifice of eternity.'[26] Now, it seems, the speaker is reluctant to breathe the rarefied air of Byzantium. He clearly opts for the 'complexities of mire and blood,' and 'complexities of fury' which Yeats dismisses. The tree-symbol is again brought into play. We are all 'heirs to that compassion, that control of the pine, of Arnolfo, of God. We are as much part of death, of 'the artifice of eternity', as we are of life, even if life has to be 'dressed for decency's sake.' Thus the central paradox of the poem recurs in several forms.

Having mentioned death, the speaker pursues the topic into Section XIII, where he describes a funeral scene the day before: the cortège 'shrouded in red', the 'dead partisan'. The communist campaigners make 'grim disciples', they have 'a plan', rather than sharing in some rite in an 'upper room' where God talks gently. Bitterly he sketches their spiritual decadence:

> the laws of love are null to them;
> and hope is humbug here unless
> the pay-off date's this side the tomb.

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25) 'Sailing to Byzantium', by W.B. Yeats, Selected Poetry, edited by N.A. Jeffares, (Macmillan, London, 1964), p105.

26) 'Byzantium' by W.B. Yeats, Ibid. p154.

In a cynically applied religious metaphor the speaker explains that their 'mass crusades' are for 'shorter hours/ plus ample goods and services'. There is hopelessness in the rhetorical question: 'Who'll fill the one Word's empty space?' This religious political theme is carried over into the next two sections.

In Section XlV the towers, representative of that mystic searching for God, seem doomed: these 'old superstitious towers' cannot survive such 'grey gales of words', such

> ...press
> of multitudes whose fists
> brandish scarlet flowers.

The speaker cynically commands the poplar to 'let fall your leaves, be less/alive'; he tells the pine to 'turn suddenly to stone', the bells to 'go dumb'. He has observed the death of feeling: both the tongue and the heart are 'frozen into stone.'

Written as a dialogue between a communist and the speaker, Section XV comes as a re-assertion of faith in the spirit. The communist boasts of technological advancement, and makes the appeal: 'O use your brain, don't feel'. The speaker is accused of being 'anti-man', as he kneels to 'a prophet man rejected/scourged and crowned with thorns.' But none of his arguments has the slightest effect on the speaker who defiantly declares: 'I nail my colours to a tree, not to a slick machine.' Section XVl is in the same 10 line stanza form as Section V, and, like that section, returns to the trees and a further broadening out of their symbolic importance. Having dispelled his cynicism, the speaker now sees how simply all conflicts, of 'words, and wars, and wills' are resolved in'their green cloisters'. His own conflict of belonging is resolved, as he now feels himself to be the boy who could expect a calm 'golden as that which crowned the seventh/on

the first Sabbath.' He knows that the images from the past, 'bird and glittering leaf and stippled stone' are part of him. The poet's earlier use of the pool image gains full clarity here. As the reflection of the trees and the sky are 'part of the pool's so precious stone,' so too his own past, guarded over by symbols, as the pool lies guarded by trees, finds reflection in him. But the pool does not remain clear and still. A sudden wind may crack the 'jewel', break up the reflection, break and blur 'each perfect image'. So too the speaker's being is in a constant state of flux: images appear, clarify, and then disappear, only to return, 'sea-changed' after undergoing 'a dubious chemistry.' It is this power that the speaker fears. He expresses his awe by alluding again to Anadyomene, stepping from a 'dead shell/ onto the startled sand', taking the mind unawares, shattering the mind's complacency. So, too, seemingly meaningless recollections may recur, 'to shatter the nervous light of thought', compelling one into a contemplation of one's origin and one's end.

The sudden 'loud thunderclaps' of the approaching storm take the speaker to his origins. For they are 'so loud and close they bring/far Africa to mind.' The landscape which surrounds him drops 'its Tuscan mask' and becomes simply the earth:

> No other than it was
> when at the age of six
> near the foot of Alwyn Kop
> its black outburst of noise
> knocked me on to my knees.

The realization of this fact seems finally to resolve the tension in the poem, seems to answer the speaker's questions about his origin and his end. But he clearly expects more:

> I pause to listen better;
> to glimpse through the coming storm's
> gloom and jagged glitter
> apocalyptic forms.

He perceives a message, but cannot interpret it:

> none of my conscious keys
> can pick the subliminal locks.

He seems in fact, to prefer not to hear the truth, but like Oedipus and Lear, be content with blindness:

> in the last analysis
> be the end but a hint of the truth,
> madness and blindness are bliss.

Section XVlll returns briefly to the present, and concludes the poem: 'Our tanks and trucks groan up the storm-tossed hill'. The speaker repeats his wonder at the fact that eye-sight can transform an object into 'something so absolved, so absolute.'

An assessment of the War Poems

In 1953 Roy Campbell, reviewing 'Stranger to Europe', drew attention to what is probably the most distinguishing feature of Guy Butler's war poetry. 'He is', writes Campbell, 'a metaphysical poet who crystallizes ideas into visual images by hard thinking when other poets would take many emotional lines explaining how they felt. The emotional effect is all the stronger for being so compactly simplified.'[27] Jeanne Heywood praises the same quality: 'His work is often characterised by a highly developed sensuous awareness and a strong visual imagination.'[28] Appeals to one or more of the senses occur in every one of the poems examined thus far, though not always to the same purpose. Often sensuous description provides a sense of place or locality, captures the essential characteristics of a particular context, as in 'Karroo Town 1939' 'Servant Girl' and 'Elegy'. Many of the war poems are constructed on the conflicting forces in the speaker's life: present is contrasted with past, emotional bluntness with sensuous enrichment. In poems such as 'Tobruk Visited 1943' sensuous reminders insinuate themselves into the soldier's thoughts, bringing the memory of home. Sensuous detail occasionally heighten the reality of the present, lending authenticity to setting, as in 'Fragment', 'Mirage', 'To Any Young Soldier' and this example from 'On First Seeing Florence':

> ... long wooded slopes
> secrete a blessed sense of getting lost
> in scented labyrinths, until the lane
> on one side falls away: sheer sky, where tossed
>
> festoons of raft mauve cirrus sway between
> the moon's dim burial and the unborn sun.

In these poems, Butler clearly thinks in imagery, which in the

27) Roy Campbell 'Roy Campbell Praises Stranger to Europe, The Cape Times, January 22, 1953.
28) Jeanne Heywood: 'Butler Frederick Guy' in English and South Africa, edited by A. Lennox Short (Cape Town, Nasau) p17.

first place addresses itself to the senses, but never only to the senses. His sensuous imagery is never mere adornment. Its most important function in the war poems is to serve the theme of dehumanisation, examined in some detail in poems such as 'Bomb Casualty', 'Mirage', and 'Air Raid Before Dawn' where dehumanised man is cruelly contrasted with his former self.

Even the 'thought' in 'On First Seeing Florence' is the result of sensory awareness of the 'trees, the mist, towers.' Butler's constant appeal to the reader's sensory equipment is clearly one of his greatest strength. It endows his verse with a simplicity of image, an immediacy that is both fresh and vivid.

Many of these poems are memorable for other reasons. The ruthless honesty with which Butler depicts man at war is another of these poems' greatest virtues. We have seen how, in poems such as 'Bomb Casualty', 'Air Raid Before Dawn', 'To Any Young Soldier', 'Letter from Monte Stanco',' December 1944', and 'Winter Solstice', Butler has developed the character of the speaker of his poems into a dramatic attitude of indifference to suffering, pain, and even death: It is this 'laconic understatement' [29] as Campbell called it, a deliberate underplay of the emotions, that belies the deeply felt compassion of the poet. It is compassion, finely controlled and never allowed to become sentimentality, which provides these poems with a convincing delicacy. This effect can be achieved in poetry only if the speaker remains detached. It is for this very reason that 'To Any Young Soldier' fails, for the speaker becomes emotionally entangled.

This period is further characterised by a high degree of experimentation with form. Terza rima is in fact the only

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29) 'Roy Campbell Praises Stranger to Europe'.

form that Butler employs with any consistency, significantly in some of the finest of the war poems, viz. 'Giotto's Campanile', 'December 1944', 'On the Brink', and Sections 1, 111, V1, X1, and XV111 of 'On First Seeing Florence.' Whereas only 11 of the remaining 31 poems adhere entirely to regularity of rhyme and metre, only 3 are bona fide free-verse poems. Butler's muse is clearly a formalized one. 'Mr Butler', continues Campbell, 'has not a natural ear for lyrical verses; to have a good ear is often a very great advantage, but sometimes it makes one degenerate into mere sound and emotion. He writes with difficulty, as Eliot does, not with fluid ease, as Dylan Thomas does (to compare two of the best living English poets). The <u>idea</u> is always the main motive of the poem with Mr Butler. It provides a hard structure of intellectual homework, over which the poem forms organically and soundly.' 30 He needs the structures of prosody to mould his ideas.

The fact that 'the idea is always the main motive' with Butler is both a strength and a weakness in the early poems. One must agree with Campbell that this outlook compelled the poet to express himself in compact imagery . But the poet's concern with the clear expression of ideas often betrays him into a too explicit paraphase of the sense of his poem. An explanatory line or two all too often mars the effect of a poem which has made its point in poetic idiom. The final line of 'Fragment' is an example. The explicit statement of 'the cold criteria of war' is redundant in the light of the poet's painstaking efforts to depict exactly that quality of war in sensuous imagery. In 'El Kahira' the spiritual decadence of Cairo is portrayed in imagery, but again Butler feels it necessary to drive home the point: 'Time has burnt man's soul to ash.' In 'To Any Young Soldier' the uncertainty

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30) 'Roy Campbell Praises <u>Stranger to Europe</u>'.

of the young soldier's command over his own fate is implied in the ironic tone of the speaker, but the explicit statement of this doubt in the last two lines mars the ironic effect.

Another unfortunate tendency, noted in 'Elegy', is Butler's use of imagery that is vague and mystical. At times Butler strives after a 'poetic' effect by employing an abstract intellectualised idiom, far removed from the sensuous simplicity of most of the early poems. This brand of imagery abounds in 'On First Seeing Florence', which is not altogether inappropriate, as the poem is largely reflective in tone. Yet Butler's precise meaning is often veiled in vague language:

> ...so eyesight lifts
> thing after thing, feels each, then lets it fall
> till outer meets with inner mystery.
> . . . .
> ...this
> awareness in a sun-warmed scrap of dust
> of all creation winging into bliss.

Even more ineffective imagery occurs in this poem, in lines where the image becomes refined to the point where it becomes an emblem. The effect is flat, 'slick' and vulgar, like that achieved by commercial art:

> But I am in love with breath
> even if I must walk
> arm in arm with a tart
> called Human History.

The whole of Section XV is guilty of this shallowness. In this section the speaker finds himself confronted by a communist, asking him to 'cleanse' his 'vision/of this mythical mirage'. Images such as 'the red oasis' and ' a slick machine' mar the dignity of the speaker's attitude.

However, the war poems, seen as a whole, are an achievement of importance. The freshness and immediacy of the early Butler-image are their most significant qualities. It is unfortunate that Butler took so long to discover a new kind of simplicity, and that he had to arrive at it by such devious routes.

CHAPTER THREE

POST WAR POEMS

The effect of the war was registered in Butler's poetry long after his demobilisation and return to South Africa, yet the poet's return to the country of his birth was a significant event. His drive to find his 'Northern origins' satisfied with the discovery of 'absolutes' in Florence, and his doubts about being a 'Stranger to Europe' dispelled, all that remained was to reacquaint himself with home, the stable core of his existence. His nostalgic portrayal of home in the early war-poems, notably 'Elegy', seems to prepare the way for an emotionally rejuvenating reunion. But this was not to be. The event signifies little to the dehumanised poet, still trapped in his 'Winter Solstice.' In June 1946 Butler found himself 'In transit between two hemispheres' in more than one sense. 'Letter to Desmond and Norah Stutchbury June 1946' reflects the poet's struggle to reconcile himself to his new-found freedom. After 'Seven hours flying' the poet, confortably resting in Almaza, rediscovers peace, but finds that he cannot cope with it:

> Peace, till the torrid continuous calm
> Gnaws at my slavish self, as it did one eyeless in Gaza.

The speaker feels himself robbed of his strength like Samson, he is reduced to a blind weakling. He realizes only too well that he has no Delilah; he has only himself to blame:

> No, I was blinded
> To any moments that mattered by being bloody-minded,
> By making a point of honour to call this earth in doubt.

He had doubted his very humanity; he must now suffer the consequences. Being simply human is simply not enough for one who had to submit to being 'ground/By habit, routine, ritual.' Thus he is 'in transit' between Europe and Africa, between war and peace, between disillusionment and anticipated fulfillment. But 'Homecoming' **blasts** these hopes. The speaker is back home - 'Under my boyhood sky' - but emotional response is beyond his capacity:

> I knew my heart had become
> A metronomic drum.
> Mere continual time,
> Not moments, passed me by.

He realizes that the place has hardly changed: it is he who has changed, he whose heart was 'fogged with lies'. Recalling his boyhood mastery of his environment, the 'bridle path/ Where singing I strolled alone,' he grieves for the loss of that intimate sense of belonging, reflected in the felling of a tree:

> I smart as the workman fell the tree,-
> Green ruin on disciplined stone.

These sentiments become the subject of Butler's first major post-war poem, 'After Ten Years.' This important poem is a comprehensive exploration of the poet's own spiritual decadence and his disillusionment in man, but it is also the promise of a fresh start, a tentative re-acceptance of a rejected god. In its composition Butler has paid careful attention to time; the poem begins at dusk, and ends at dawn. So, too, the poet moves from bitter depression to excited hope. Dusk is 'a curse on the city'; dawn is the coming of Christ.

In the first section a disillusioned speaker mourns the loss of his vision of the 'great Republic/Of men all stalwart, straight as pines in the sun.' His dream has died, his hopes have been replaced by the 'hurtle of hail' and 'night coming down like a curse on the city.' The storm is symbolic of the

turmoil in his mind. As in earlier poems, the inclement weather curtains off understanding. The speaker has lost his faith in man, and now desperately seeks an 'altar'. The complexity of a human being is compared to a monotonous game, a contest between 'agile reason' and 'bellowing passion', floodlit by 'the small proud arclight, Mind,' and watched by the 'appetites and nerves', spectators in the tense arena. There is no release:

> Round the clock and the months and all four seasons
> The same, same game, whose crowds cannot disperse,
> Not even on Sundays, cannot look out or up.

The conceit has the effect of reducing man to a machine. Man is analysed into his components, but no role is found for the soul. Man hardly needs a soul, for he cannot 'look out or up', and the 'level world' has nothing 'To claim the whole strong heart of a normal man.' In the line: 'The common sky has banished the royal sun,' Butler deliberately puns on 'sun' as he does in the last line of the poem: 'Let dawn your Son in joy...', clarifying the source of the speaker's grief: the rejection of 'A faith no sensible man can ever believe.' The mind rules supreme and urges distrust of the senses, the heart and the soul:

> Let's stick to things we know, continue to make
> Our daily Mass on dust and adrenalin.

One has seen this sense foreshadowed in the war-poems, notably 'On First Seeing Florence' (Section XV) in which the coming of the 'new' religion is heralded. The speaker's despair at the supremacy of the 'arclight' intellect indicates Butler's attitude: he is still the humanitarian, searching for humanity's soul. The storm ends, and the speaker opens the window, searching for peace. Again a familiar theme recurs, as he contrasts the certainty of Nature's 'sequence from summer to winter solstice' with man's stagnant state. An unusual image

of icicles piercing the speaker's spine and tongue conveys his own immobilility, insensitivity, and speechlessness. He can only 'stare with empty eyes' at the effect of the moonlight on objects outside. He envies the plants and animals about him: 'For them spring is sure.' A brief return to the Corn God of 'Winter Solstice' explains man's condition of 'arrested dusk':

> The corn gods are dead or dying. Folk no longer
> Live for a resurrection, no longer look
> To rebirth of Man or of God......

We have traded mysticism for science, spirit for intellect:

> Instead of devils and gods, neurotic shivers
> At private assassins an inch below the skin.

Lovers walk down canyons 'flanked by flats.' They see no stars, but 'numbered standard lamps.' Man has sold out to progress, and offered his soul in payment.
But despair does not triumph. The flicker of hope in 'Winter Solstice' here becomes substantial. The speaker faces up to his shortcomings:

> I accept my pain. I am incomplete,
> Cannot measure, build or synthesize.

and undertakes to rediscover God with 'uncensored senses.' He intends to break the restricting mould of adulthood which the war has cast, and to approach God afresh, 'Curious as a child, vulnerable as a lover.'

The transformation of Butler's idiom from the simply sensuous to the complex and intellectual is evident in 'After Ten Years'. The imagery of the first section is reminiscent of the war-poems: the weather and other natural phenomena occur as mirrors of the speaker's spiritual state. But the central

image of the second section - 'The same, same game' - and the metaphysical image of section three are produced by 'hard thought'; and they are 'thought-images'. They are to be understood, not seen or heard, felt or tasted. It is, as Campbell points out, the thought which counts with Butler, a feature which once again betrays the poet into paraphrase rather than poetry - 'Folk no longer/Live for a resurrection..' and into popular imagery: 'the candle and hearth of the heart is dead.'

'After Ten Years' is Butler's 'Waste Land'. Spiritual bluntness and imcompetence are exposed, ironically lauded, and finally dismissed as the power of the fallen God reasserts itself. Interestingly, an early version of the final section of the poem, titled simply 'Poem', contains no reference whatever to religion. Here are the last three stanzas of the two versions:

From 'After Ten Years':

> An essentail catalyst. O hidden God,
> Sweet Giver of faith, still veiled, unknown to me,
> Humbly I start again, set out to rediscover
>
> You with uncensored senses: shedding all dreams,
> Departing all cities of words, I shall wander
> Curious as a child, vulnerable as a lover:
>
> Let dawn your Son in joy, or pain, or wonder
> In anger or kisses on these open pulses.

From 'Poem':

> An essential catalyst. O moving earth
> And human heart, still veiled, unknown to me,
> Humbly I start again, set out to rediscover

> You with uncensored senses: shedding all dreams,
> Departing all cities of words, I shall wander
> Curious as a child, vulnerable as a lover:
>
> Let dawn the sun in joy, or pain, or wonder
> In anger or kisses on these open pulses.

The aftermath of war is evident in the dehumanised speaker's desperate plea to be moved, to be led closer to the 'human heart.' But the final version is more convincing in the context of the poem. Firstly, 'After Ten Years' has strong religious undertones: the final section seems a suitable climax to this theme. Secondly, in the light of Butler's earlier rejection of God in 'On the Brink' and 'Winter Solstice', 'After Ten Years' becomes a forceful reply, a satisfactory return to God as the fountainhead, rather than the vague life-force associated with 'moving earth'.

The spiritual journey begun in this poem, continues in another major poem of this period, 'To a Statue of the Virgin' which was written about a year after 'After Ten Years.' The poem is in four parts. In the first three parts the poet apostrophizes the virgin, and in the last part she replies. In part 1 the physical incongruity and spiritual remoteness of the virgin are emphasized:

> Girl of stone, too white against this dark
> Catastrophe of cypresses, too cool
> Between sun-angry rocks.......
> . . . .
> O swathed in visions and songs above our distresses
> You never were native to these marble-stone hills.

The speaker can find no comfort in her glance. Indeed, she seems afraid to 'glance/Into this pit of boredom and sensation.' She has foresaken her earthly ties, enjoys a 'blind-eyed peace', a 'bloodless bliss.' Butler is clearly re-interpreting the theme of 'After Ten Years'. There is the same anxiety, an almost desperate concern for the absence of the spirit.

In order to stress the Virgin's earth-ties, Butler devotes Part 11 to the Annunciation. The speaker reminds Mary of her simple origins.

He relates how, after the household chores, Mary would go out into the garden and pray, quite unaware of her future responsibility as the Mother of Christ. Her earthliness is thus boldly contrasted with her divinity, creating tension which is increased as silence descends in anticipation of the Annunciation:

> Then the olive that shaded your head
> Laden with setting fruit
> In a gust from nowhere whispered, swayed
> Itself and its shadow a second
> Then stilled in every leaf
> And was mute.
> The far flute hushed.
> Even the solemn bee
> That hummed in the court all morning
> Went suddenly dumb.

Part 111 returns to despondency. Despair grips the speaker, as he considers 'we are men for whom/All miracles are dead,' an echo of 'Folk no longer/Live for a resurrection...' from 'After Ten Years.' The meaninglessness of life is conveyed in an image borrowed from Macbeth:

> Our dry days drag and wander
> To various silly deaths.

The speaker's tone conveys a note of urgency as he appeals to the Virgin to 'give us what we need.' He asks for a revival of our faith 'That we may get a glimpse/Of that glorious star...' He desires an experience outside the realms of time where all that is paradoxical about life, 'the quarrel of cube/And the love and the wrath of God' will become clear. He implores the cold statue to respond:

Sweet maid, lift up your arms,
Let lip and limb accept!
Rose of the earth burst now!

At last she speaks, but has little to offer in the way of consolation. God does not make Himself known in a physical manner. Nor does He reveal Himself to gratify a state of mind. He is present in the flux of life:

Between the stabs and the caresses
. . . .
Between the heart and the sword.

God is present neither in the speaker's dehumanised state, nor in his present receptiveness to emotion; but somewhere in between. He is synonymous with a process of becoming. Her advice is: 'Be still as stone.' Bear your load with fortitude. Why should God be the only sufferer? Man must bear part of the responsibility for his inhumanity to man. What the speaker regarded as weakness - the Virgin's aloof attitude - is in fact strength. He perceives his own weakness, and the weakness of all of mankind.

'To a Statue of the Virgin' has shortcomings. It is in those very parts where Butler approaches his theme most closely that the poem fails, again through over-simplification and explicit statement:

But we are men for whom
All miracles are dead
. . . . .
We know we lack you, Love
Hands fumble for a gift.

Yet the poem's virtues outweigh these weaknesses. Butler's development of the central metaphor, the cold stone statue representing the death of feeling, unifies the poem. Section 1 stresses the coldness of the statue. It seems incongruous in its setting, incapable of providing comfort or compassion. Section 11 portrays the Virgin as Mary the 'village girl', performing mundane duties, naive, simple, primarily human.

Indented stanzas predict the amazing events which will follow. This entire section serves both to contrast Mary's past humanity with her present remoteness, and to prepare the reader for the metaphysical Section IV in which the statue comes to life, revealing emotion and sensuality as well as wisdom:

> Beginning to keen and sway
> . . . .
> Unbinding her heavy tresses
> Bowing her beautiful head.
> . . . .
> So she said
> Weeping...
> . . . .
> Breasts pierced by His thorn-crowned head.
> . . . .

This section highlights her humanity. Yet her message is: 'Be still as stone.' It is through the development of this metaphor, through the reader's awareness of Mary's share of the burden of grief that his own burden is perceived.

The style of this last section differs from that of the rest of the poem. Shorter lines tend to emphasize rhyme, as in

> Will any find
> The Eternal mind.

The section is interspersed with narrative links, eg. 'Then she said,' and 'O so she said'. These features, together with an increased uniformity of metre gives this section a hymnal quality, thereby heightening the emotional effect of contentment: at last the speaker seems at peace.

Butler's interest in the isolated individual or race was, however, not to be satisfied. In 'The Underdogs' his criticism of enforced, 'legalized' separation of racial groups from each other lures Butler into cynicism and bitterness: as in 'To Any Young Soldier,' and Section XV of 'On First Seeing Florence', these feelings give rise to trite and

unconvincing poetry. The 'underdogs' are the black population groups of South Africa, who, the speaker warns,

> ... have renounced
> The nice obedience of the sons of Ham,
> Have joined, instead, the bitter tribes
> Of Ishamel and of Cain.

This is the dominant tone of the poem. In cryptic, melodramatic catch-phrases, Butler attempts to convey an attitude of grim foreboding:

> This refusal to be menials,
> This devil's pride in pits of crime and fear
> Shall cry in crisis like a thunderclap
> Through midnight gales like a thunderclap.

This cynicism gives way to bitterness as the typically indifferent white attitude is portrayed:

> So what! We, of the chosen pigmentation,
> Shall calmly call on our tribalised God:
>
> 'Lord save the shining Christian culture
> Of White South Africa!' Then squat
> Heroically behind clean Vickers guns
> Jabbing death in our innocent hands.

This attitude is the theme of 'Sundowner', written at about the same time as 'The Underdogs'. 'Sundowner' portrays an embodiment of the white South African 'anti-conscience': an emotionally hardened, alcoholic female. The 'languid lady' of the poem has no specific personality: she has only symbolic racial significance.

A central feature of the poem is the implementation of the Gorgon legend. In the first stanza an allusion to Medusa introduces a sinister note:

> Languid lady, whose head and sinuous arms
> Open like orchids from a night-shade dress.

Her lethalness is suggested by the fact that she wears 'a night-shade dress.' She has no peace of mind, except that which is available in 'loosening gin' and a 'cloudy synthesis of calms.' She must, 'at all costs,' be isolated from reality, and prevent her 'soul's-eye' from detecting this 'glitter-banter':

> Shut the dark cell at your Siberian centre,
> The steel-ice lids that keep the soul's-eye blind:
> Its dimmest blink upon this glitter-banter
> Would cockatrice your loveliness to sand.

Appeals to her conscience, requests for charity are fruitless: 'The Eye 's in prison.' 'The Eye' in this poem represents conscience, and is further indicative of spiritual and emotional numbness, as in 'Letter to Desmond and Norah Stutchbury June 1946' when the speaker lacked the dimension to accommodate peace:

> Peace, till the torrid continuous calm
> Gnaws at my slavish self, as it did one eyeless in Gaza.

In 'After Ten Years' the speaker's 'empty eyes' reveal his inability to find peace. This 'lady', too cannot find peace. The 'corpses' of those denied a chance by her 'rot within her scented peace.'
There is no message of hope for this lost soul. The poem concludes with the ironic solace:

> And pray for the day your scarlet nails will cut
> The Eye right out: then you'll be blessed, blind.

The implication is that the effect she has on people with whom she communicates is as disastrous as the effect produced by gazing on Medusa.[31] Her inability to ignore the poor is expressed in terms of the legend:

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31) Paul Harvey (editor): The Oxford Companion to English Literature, (London, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1953) p509.

Though the Gorgon
Hissed sharply through your fresh cosmetic bloom
It failed to freeze the hero on the shingle
That grim, slack-bellied Perseus of the poor.

Butler gives the legend a new ramification however, in which Medusa becomes her own victim:

A cool possessive snake
Slips patient coils around your precious fleece.

This disillusionment lives on in the short, powerful poem, 'Having Seen Through the Pathetic Fallacy', a poem which reads like a cynical refutation of everything that Butler believes in. A dispirited, indifferent speaker, strongly reminiscent of the numbed speaker in 'Winter Solstice', flatly denies any sense of belonging on earth, among men:

'No chord ties us to earth.'

Having seen through the fallacy that men do belong, the speaker describes the two greatest influences in his life as being of no further importance. Christianity is dismissed:

since the larger silk cocoon
Of the Christian scheme was torn.

Neither Europe nor Africa claims his allegiance:

Neither North nor South
Can warm a paralysis

No excess of feeling is allowed:

Keep the eye clear of despair,
unclouded by dreams or hopes.

The poem ends as it began:

No cord ties us to earth.
Our blood is in different groups

except for the shift in the meaning of 'cord' . In the first

line 'chord' indicates a musical relationship - man is not in harmony with earth - as well as an intimate, parent/child relationship - the umbilical chord. Man's isolation is inherent, and unalterable. A feature of this poem is the comparative simplicity of idiom. The familiar weather-metaphor, sustained throughout the poem, is supported by other natural images, e.g.

> Since last a living thing
> burst from my chrysalis.

This simplicity of style is evident in four sonnets written at this time, two of them on themes related to the theme of 'Having Seen Through the Pathetic Fallacy'. In 'David' and 'Pieta' local instances of grief are given universal significance. A tone of awe characterises the octave of 'David', as his qualities and feats are enumerated:

> Bronze-armoured giants shall crumble in your aim.
> . . . .
> Out of your stripling flesh shall flower
> Majesty, dominion, power...

The sestet introduces an ominous change:

> Bathsheba shall break you.

For centuries to come we shall continue to read of 'David'; we shall forget his feats, his laws. We shall remember only his grief:

> ...the hour when with aching limbs
> Dragging up steep stairs, your aimless eyes
> Weep stones for all the Absaloms of Time.

The measure of his grief is such that it embraces all fathers' grief for their sons. It is this that isolates him, and which, paradoxically, makes him human. The sonnet 'Pieta', tells of a war-time experience. A group of soldiers, 'marching through smashed buildings, trees', revelling in the feeling of power, are surprised by the sight of a child staring at them from a ruined building. Instinctively, upon seeing the

soldiers, the child's hand reaches for its mother's skirts. She faces them aggressively, cradling her child's face against her legs. The speaker is moved. He feels the pressure of the 'silver cord' that releases feelings in the mother round his throat, until he imagines that he is at the scene of the crucifixion:

> Till I could swear noon-darkness stuns the skies
> Above a woman pierced beneath a tree
> On whose black bough her one Son sweats and dies.

Thus a simple scene, a commonplace experience to a soldier, is endowed with universality by the awakening of compassion. The power of love is the theme of the other two sonnets, 'Game' and 'Patience'. 'Game' celebrates the power love attains by virtue of its elemental, primitive being. Love is the gift of everyone, of all ages. The 'pristine hush' that follows passion is 'a hinterland that mocks new history.' Love indeed has no history, no date, no time limits as is stressed in 'Watching the Seed-Grass':

> Time for a moment is wrecked on these hills;
> We lie eternal, in shade in sun;
> This place is nowhere, everywhere;
> And our love, O my Love, is it ours only
> Or the dream of everyone?

Man inherits the right to love. In 'Game' Butler finds his metaphor in the lion's nonchalant sense of superiority: lovers attain the stature of lions, unchallengably inhabiting a special region, 'Knowing their wells can never be defiled.' This implicit faith in love has roots in earlier verse, especially the simple and highly successful 'Coal'. Butler's view of love has remained unchanged.

The weather again provides the metaphor in 'Patience.' After a night of quarreling, a 'storm-tormented night', the lovers' lives seem to be under a permanent 'zero's quilt' of snow. The speaker is confident, however, of the restorative power of love:

> A born fool knows
> That under zero's quilt big rainbows doze,
> That brilliant music sleeps in tacit streams.

The sestet provides a twist. Here the speaker considers that he may be mistaken. Her 'pallor' may be 'permanent'; her 'rippling pulse' 'levelled to a dead-beat metronome'. If that were true, he would nevertheless continue to love her:

> ...all through
> Your frigid solstice I'll keep hearth for you,
> I'll kindle coals: when you are cold come home.

These sonnets are highly successful poems because they are so positive in outlook compared with the cynicism of 'The Underdogs', 'Sundowner', and 'Having Seen Through the Pathetic Fallacy.' Moreover Butler has, in these sonnets, returned to the idiom of the war poems. Simple nature-imagery reveals, once more, the poet's greatest gift, summed up in this comment on the image in the first two lines of 'David':

> You pure and nimble boy, like candle flame
> Burning above the pebbled brook.

Lines such as these 'maintain Butler's reputation as an exquisitely sensual imagist, a sculptor of great delicacy of touch.'[32] Compared with the images found in these sonnets, lines such as

> Shut the dark cell at your Siberian centre
> The steel-ice lids that keep the soul's eye blind,

from 'Sundowner' seem poor attempts at a kind of intellectuality that is not Butler's idiom. Two plays published at about this time <u>The Dam</u> (1953) and <u>The Dove Returns</u> (1956) confront problems which, though by no means new, are still unresolved at this point. The tension between Europe and Africa was, as has been shown, a subject often touched on in earlier verse. Butler's first confrontation of it occurred

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32) <u>PEN 1960</u>: New South African writing and a survey of fifty years of creative achievement, issued by The South African Centre of the International PEN Club, p21.

in 'On First Seeing Florence,' a poem whose first draft was completed only in 1950. The Dam and The Dove Returns focus on some of the problems of the English-speaking South African, chiefly his difficulty in finding his place on this continent. These plays deserve some attention in so far as they illuminate the poetry of this period.

The Dam tells the story of Douglas Long, a Karroo farmer of settler stock, and his efforts to build a dam on his farm. Despite the opposition of most of his family and friends, he presses on determinedly. Early thunderstorms destroy the wall a few days before completion. Long decides to abandon the project, but, ironically, the very people who had opposed the idea now persuade him to rebuild. This time he succeeds.

This simple story-line is complicated by the allegorical level on which the play operates. The dam is a symbol of man's defiance of Nature, and of an English-speaking man's defiance of Africa. Long's obsession is with more than tons of concrete: the dam is a European's attempt at signing his name on an African landscape. In his characterization Butler holds up the Europe/Africa tension for our condideration. Alongside Douglas Long, 'an angular aloe for the veld', is his wife Jane, 'a sophisticated flower from one of those pseudo-country families at the Cape.' Another contrast is between Long and his brother, Dr Robert Long, who sees disaster in South Africa's growth towards her own identity, her constant moving away from Europe. Last of the Longs is Susan, their daughter, who alone shares her father's love of the land. Juxtaposed with the Longs are the Afrikaners, Oom Jan de Bruin and his son, Sybrand. Their sense of total belonging is contrasted with the Longs'. Oom Jan's opposition to the project stems from his simplistic view of the divine order of things; the land is as God wants it. It is the young man, Sybrand, who sees the advantages of building together. He cannot understand his father's fear of mingling with the English. A third group of people, the coloureds

Kaspar and Katrina, are also opposed to the dam. Their scepticism is based on superstition, and is meant to represent the tribal mysticism of the non-white races of their country. Several racial issues are raised, but these are not important here. What is important is that Long triumphs over opposition. Allegorically, the play resolves all these conflicts, for the dam spans the space between different groups, stemming spiritual erosion.

The Dove Returns is a Boer War story. Its central character is a 'Boerevrou', Sarah van Heerden. Like Long she is obsessed with an ideal: the preservation of her family and her race. Their farm is occupied by a British regiment. Its commanding officer, Lieutenant Gracy, establishes a relationship with Aletta, Sarah's daughter which embitters the mother. Through reckless disobedience Paul, the van Heerden's son, gets himself killed and mortally wounds Gracy. Sarah will not allow the British soldiers to bury Gracy in the family cemetery. He is eventually buried some distance from the house, in the 'godforsaken' veld. The final act takes place some years later on Good Friday, the anniversary of Paul's death. The war is over, but Sarah's hatred of the English has, if anything, grown stronger. Even the news that Gracy's father has come from England to see his son's grave fails to move her. But then a miracle occurs. Shaw, a South African who had acted as a scout for the British, reveals himself to be Aletta's lover. He persuades Sarah to see him as a South African. Gracy's request to see Paul's grave moves Sarah. She triumphs over her hatred, even proposes that his son's remains be moved next to Paul's. Her personal triumph has a wide significance: it is Africa accepting Europe. Allegorically again, rather than dramatically, the tension is resolved. The final paragraph of Butler's lecture 'The Language and the Land' gives the philosophic basis of the allegory:

> It seems to me that the role of English - caught between two increasingly violent and exclusive nationalities - is to keep on stating, with patience and courage, that our common humanity can unite us. Our country has been named by us all, it belongs to us all, we all belong to it. Let us accept each other: with affection when this comes naturally; with courtesy when it is difficult; and with common sense always. Our dead have left their names side by side on the map: a mountain range can be one, although its peaks may be called Gamkaskop, the Hogsback and the Katberg; one ocean washes Mosselbaai, and George, and Knysna; and the blood in all our veins is red. 33

In the poems of this period Butler was building his own dam. Two long poems, 'Livingstone Crosses Africa' and 'Home Thoughts' are directly concerned with issues raised in the plays. Both poems are also stages in the transition from the philosophico-intellectual style of 'Elegy', 'On First Seeing Florence', and 'After Ten Years' to the narrative style of the poems of the sixties. They are in fact combinations of these styles.

The impressive story of David Livingstone's pioneering journey across Africa in 1853 provides Butler with a metaphor for his own journey in 'Livingstone Crosses Africa'. The first section of the poem is devoted solely to the story. The tale unfolds in bold imagery:

> (Livingstone) Struck through the darkness under Capricorn
> The slow white lightning of his westward path:

His bearers grew mutinous, but were silenced at last;

> One morning, blue through the torrid mist
> There broke the long Te Deum of the sea.

Then their pride and joy knew no bounds. They had walked to the end of the world. The use of 'native' imagery conveys their excitement: The sea is 'a thousand broad Zambezis

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33) 'The Language and the Land', p10 of manuscript.

multiplied/By all the leaves on every African tree.' At Loanda a ship was waiting to take him home to England. The speaker can only wonder at what enormous cost to himself Livingstone decided to excorcise those 'Shapes, scents, sounds bred in his bones and brain' and to lead his bearers back to their homes. The route by which he returned led him to the discovery of the Victoria Falls. Butler's flair for story-telling includes a sweeping imagination that takes in vast spaces, and an ear for the dramatic phrase:

> But two thousand miles away, two years
> And he flings down on Quelimane's beach
> More ingots hammered from his forehead's forge;
> The world applauds, but louder in his ears
> The smoke that Thunders, Kabra Basa Gorge.

A change of style is evident in Section 11, as Butler settles down to consider the application of this story to his own life. The tone becomes reflective, the style philosophic. The speaker points out the quality that 'deeds of the great' have to 'clear the image small men hold of themselves'. So too in his case, Livingstone's 'great journey' places his travails in perspective. The speaker is in Italy, on 'this sophisticated shore', but he has not found there what he had been looking for:

> Nothing is as expected now I am here;
> No reassurance of a heart in heaven,
> No letters, no hope, no home.

His bearers, 'blood and bones' and 'tribal flesh' echo Livingstone's as they cry: '"Look you are finished; but there is more to me! "' He had left Africa with certain hopes, ideals of finding a 'home' and spiritual peace. 'After Ten Years' reveals that he could not find this in Africa. Yet, having arrived here, he is faced with a problem: should he sit here and 'rot', or turn back to his own world,

> ...examine it
> With eyes that have their vision at command,
> Eyes that note with care....?

He realises that he can 'expect no wonders', and that, he is out of touch with humanity 'Whether in Naples here or under Capricorn'.

In Section 111 the speaker draws his conclusion. The sight of people in contact with each other, of two workmen dividing 'their common burden' as they walk, of two lovers swinging ' the censer of their love' seems 'secret and distant' to him, strange in 'the severing gloom'. It evokes in him a hunger for 'human bread'. The longing for real contact with people becomes an obsession, like Livingstone's obsession with exploration; but his 'cold and noting eyes' can only see, 'Not leap the gap which isolates us all.' The speaker feels isolated from humanity, and powerless to make contact.

The unsolved problem in 'Livingstone Crosses Africa' receives Butler's attention in the second of the Italian poems, 'Home Thoughts'. The poem follows the same pattern as 'Livingstone Crosses Africa': narrative followed by philosophic reflection and application. In this case Butler finds the story in Greek culture, in the legend of the archetypal conflict between reason and passion, Apollo and Dionysus. Again Butler's sweeping imagination and powers of narration are evident. The contrast between the adversaries is drawn in swift strokes: Apollo with 'plummet and rule', instruments of measurement and reason, 'glittering' in 'clean-cut bronze'; Dionysus, 'barbarous with drums', 'amid a snarl of leopards'. Vivid verbs help to enact the battle: '..wild bouts among the barley shocks..'; Apollo 'side-slipped to the sun' when threatened; Dionysus would 'slink instinctive into copses...' The contest could, however, have no conclusive result, for

> ...neither could
> Conquer the force in which the other stood.

Eventually Apollo allowed Dionysus 'elbow-room', for secretly

he admired his qualities. And so the two came to exist side by side.

The origin of Butler's use of this mythological battle to comment on conditions in Africa is provided by Butler himself in the lecture, 'The Republic and the Arts.' [34] The idea itself derives from Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy. The thought of its applicability occurred to Butler during a visit to Ghana in 1954. Travelling through the rain-forests by jeep, he was surprised by a large company of women dancing, screaming, 'their faces wet with tears...ecstatically happy.' [35] Later he became aware of the drumming by the great orchestra of the Ashanti. The total submission of dancer and drummer to what they were doing was new and disturbing, and seemed to Butler to represent the force of Dionysus. Some days later he was shown a carpet with a geometric design, in which he saw Apollo's 'clarity, intellect, authority'. [36] He realized he had experienced two extremes. For the purposes of his lecture Butler equated Europe with Apollo, and Africa with Dionysus. The same equation holds good for 'Home Thoughts', written shortly after the experience described above.

As in 'Livingstone Crosses Africa' the speaker enters the poem bodily in Section 11. He is in Italy, but he 'hankers homeward', and searches for reasons, concluding that it is because even here, where

> Triumphant marble effigies defy
> The moody turmoils of the air,

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34) Guy Butler: 'The Republic and the Arts', (University of the Witwatersrand, 1962).

35) Ibid. p11.

36) Ibid. p12.

that he detects the 'predatory shade'. The influence of Dionysus is felt here too, since he has been allowed to let 'his leopards range the earth and sky!' The mystical presence is given sensuous force:

> It sniffs the night and pads the cracked parterre
> Between dry laurels and the shattered urn.

Dionysus is successfully destroying the existing order. The speaker, realising that 'Man's task is to get such dark things clear', alludes to Galileo, whose experimentation with the pendulum produced

> ...that system-smashing metronome
> Whose jazztime spoilt the slow waltz of the spheres.

Man can impose his own reasonable order onto the existing natural order; but he himself has to cope with instinctive forces, 'dreams' bred in 'African dark' which can unsettle man's reason. There is also much that cannot be subjected to man's reason:

> What pendulum can trace the mind's unseen
> Sharp arcs, its blind man's reach
> Round knots of being that have never been
> Subdued to slip through the flaming hoops of speech?

Considering Africa 'across this night', the speaker sees in 'our primitive storm' that which he could 'give consciousness and form', but he lacks the courage to face and try to interpret Africa's Dionysian 'furious dance'.

Section 111 seems designed to reveal the powerlessness of the reasoned order imposed on the universe. There is much we humans cannot understand, and need to accept as a matter of faith. An allusion to 'Exodus' clarifies the point: unless, like Moses, we are prepared to accept and to subscribe to the power of faith, we are doomed, like the Egyptians, to 'blowing dead bubbles in a Red Sea flood.'

Section lV brings together all the strands. The speaker reveals his personal resolution of the problem of hankering homewards, mooted in Section ll:

> I have not found myself on Europe's maps,
> A world of things, deep things I know endure
> But not the context for my one perhaps.
> I must go back with my five simple slaves
> To soils still savage, in a sense still pure:
> My loveless, shallow land of artless shapes
> Where no ghosts glamourize the recent graves
> And everything in Space and Time just is:

What he has gained is neither Mosaic faith nor Galilean clarity:

> A clearer love is all that I bring home.

In returning to face Dionysus, the speaker invokes Apollo 'to cross the tangled scrub', to 'visit our vital if untamed abysm'. Dionysus is already there and has been there for centuries. All that the speaker desires is to let 'the lightning of your (Apollo's) quickening eye' and 'his abounding darkness meet and mate'. The problem of the poem resolves itself into this paradox. What the speaker desires is an Africa where we can 'sacrifice in the temple of both gods.'

The strength of both of these poems lies in their first sections. Butler is a master of the narrative. While his stories move at a lively pace he is able at the same time to instill feeling into the telling, often by a single word, thereby involving the reader's sympathy and admiration, as in this example:

> Since none could take them home if he were gone
> He wrenched his grey gaze inward...
> (my underlining)

Yet neither of these poems is entirely successful in its

intention. In neither is the conclusion reached by the speaker fully dramatised by the poem. To the reader the speaker's conclusions remain hypothetical solutions. In the first the fault lies in the application of the story of Livingstone to the speaker's life: the connection between 'His first great journey' and 'my own travails' is slight. Livingstone explored new terrain, risked his life for the sake of his bearers' happiness, and discovered a waterfall. The speaker's travels take him to a previously known land, Italy, where his 'searching ends in a sudden sea'. He discovers a 'gap which isolates us all', and a hunger for contact. We are told that Livingstone's journey makes the speaker's 'travails dwindle to a decent size'; this seems inadequate justification for using the story as the basis of the poem. Butler sustains the association of the 'journey' and the speaker's 'travails' throughout the poem, but this amounts to little more than telling the reader that they are complementary, without actually showing that they are. Thus the rational basis of the poem is weak: the reader does not see how the speaker has arrived at his conclusion.

In 'Home Thoughts' the fault lies elsewhere. Again, the narrative section of the poem is well written: Butler depicts the battle between Dionysus and Apollo in sensuously exciting language. But in the application of the story to the speaker's life he resorts to a type of imagery that is unrelated to the business of the poem:

> The sceptre-grasping ikons round the dome
> Shook as his ape-like palms
> Payed out that system smashing metronome
> Whose jazztime spoilt the slow waltz of the spheres.

The imagery in these lines is jarring and seems out of keeping with the tone of the poem. It seems to have grown out of the poet's head, rather than out of the complexities

of the poem. The result is that the speaker's declarations 'A clearer love is all that I bring home,' leaves the reader surprised at how he could have arrived at this conclusion.

Both of these appear to be essays rather than

poems. Butler has sacrificed the art of writing poetry for the sake of clarity of sense. The result is line upon line of paraphrase of the message of the poems, in which the urge to tell overshadows the need to show.

In 'Bronze Heads', an uncollected poem from this period, Butler finds a new symbol of Apollo in Black Africa:

Bronze Heads

1

Mud-mat villages like childish sums
All wrong on a slate; the bad road through the bush;
Loud babies, frantic hens; in heat and hush
Happy-go-lucky soft-mandibled drums
Like termites at the pit-props of the mind;
Then, foreign among smudged green and dusty reds,
Clear glass and concrete in a shapeless square,
This little museum. We find what we came to find.
Perturbed by their authority, we stare
In silence at the beauty of these heads.

Imperturbable, these kingly bronzes stare.
Their sudden resurrection from black loam
To our undisciplined days can't startle them.
Achieved for once, and so for everywhere
Their tragic vision. These noble faces, - faces
That felt time's touch and faced our common doom -
How passionately passive they glance at all
This rabble and rubble on their old high places:
Such eyes might watch ten more Zimbabwes fall
And still outstare our continental gloom.

Zimbabwe's wall and a dozen bronzes sum
Our continents eons of grins and tears;
What sage grew wise behind her hedge of spears?
Her carvings were made for white ants to consume:
Small skill in friezing no glazing breath

To fix in art, as once in China or Greece,
The second of sight that makes such an ass of death.
While Troy and Rome were towering, tumbling
And dead Cordelia weighted the old King's knees
Here only the sun-warmed granite was cracking, crumbling.

Sixteen centuries since the Cross, and none
Had paved a highway, keyed a bridge, or arch
Through which victorious regiments might march -
No ringing of trowels down on neat, dressed stone.
Through plains as large as Europe floes of game
Went drifting on the droughts, and lost tribes wandered
Changing their plumage like migrating birds.
Young men were brave, no doubt the old men pondered -
Dumb ghosts in footloose air, since no scribe came
To pen their deeds in pallisades of words.

My eyes are staring into their brazen stare;
But mind has slipped to a different, Southern scene:
An old surveyor's gravestone skew between
Invading thorns that had no business there:
It seemed that indiscriminate scrub had won:
For when the mimosa bloomed the sexy wind
Was drunk with bees and scents, forgetting death;
While under the bleak light of the winter sun
The shadows cast by frost-white thorns made blind
The lucid name and date line carved beneath.

I let that stubborn thorn scrub symbolise
Undated cycles whose proud rituals of war,
First fruits, making love, once froze before
The timely wisdom in this bronze king's eyes:
But dreading what subtler dances might be born
Within that wisdom's shade, rebellious sons
Blinded and broke and black loam smothered him.
And still the sap of tribal trees all runs
To golden bloom, ecstatic dithyramb,
Or Spartan regiments and frost-white thorn.

11

Far South: In wagons my folks bore
Barrels of gunpowder and the Book of books;
Found all things different: language, looks,
Concepts of property, law:
No preaching steeples, signposts, watching maps
Keep frontiers prim: the exile's fist must clutch
Bare acres and hours in unique acts.
Small wonder, pitched between drum-shaken rocks,
Felling the scrub, on fording cataracts
That they were forced to jettison so much.

Wakeful round their red watch fires
While war chants surged between strange stars and veld
They found the love of God less clearly spelt
Than in the neat and bell-blessed shires.
Frontiers turn justice rough.
Men kill for a home. In history
All but the saints must take their kid gloves off:
Yet when they met upon the Sabbath day
Each granite torso, softened, seemed to pray:
'Deal gently, Lord of hosts, with such as me.'

Their women by old instinct knew
The not-so-vain importance of their clothes,
Of fashions, graces, quieter prayers, small oaths
To cool the breath their menfolk drew.
Victorian bonnets snubbed the Stone-age sun:
Full sleeves and fuller skirts, pink frills, blue laces
Kept visible still the delicate vein.
Their treble part-songs touched the wilderness,
Unleashing over course and brutal spaces
A thistledown attack of gentleness.

111

The first year they built cattle kraals:
Next, hacking acres clear of mimosa thorn
They ploughed and put them under Indian Corn;
Then quarried stones for their homestead walls.
You smug inheritors of landscapes where
Each gentle acre praises long generations
Who taught it what clothes and when to wear;
O heirs to bridge and byre and buttressed wall,
Imagine that chisel chipping, those first foundations,
Brand new, without a precedent at all.

But more significant by far
Than this migration of an English hearth
Rose Northern shadowy trees from the alien earth
To soften this Southern wedge of star.
As odd disturbances of air or light
(Halo, rainbow, cross-wind or eclipse)
May herald a hero in disguise,
So, dwarfing the mimosas' gold and white,
These trees might be our green apocalypse,
Artesian shimmerings under arid skies.

Wide winds that rifle and disperse
The airborne seeds of my subcontinent
Had never frisked such stately stems nor bent
Leaves so abundant and diverse.
The strict Euclidian sand stone hills
Who'd kept unsmudged their classic forms

Through patient centuries of scrub and bush
Saw in those shapes an index of new wills:
Ears keener to catch the lapidary hush,
Hearts twice as stubborn at the heart of storms.

Roots in a fossil dinosaur,
Housing all day a wise and constant owl,
The dark pine dulled the hunting-dog's mean howl
As it had dulled the wolf's before;
Stood steeple-fast against the glare and gloom
When rumbling tribes poured lava on the farms.
All this was old. A straight-grained stem,
Which demi-gods had smoothed for mast or spear,
Might justly weigh in green perennial arms
Tempestuous seasons of a younger year.

Subtler, the poplar caught whole shoals
Of singing migrating birds, and let them go;
Then vainly stretched bare seines for the knowing, slow
Constellations, those peripatetic schools.
This too was old. She knew all distance made
To reach across; and torn things more at once
In Sheba's laugh than Solomon's fine frown:
But now she trembles, lest, beyond her shade,
Bright children dancing in the scented sun
Should join the watching regiments of thorn.

IV

Few tribes chant now; and hearth-rug lions are dumb;
Most rivers and ranges are mapped and properly named;
But Africa is anything but tamed
And God alone knows what is yet to come.
In spite of city parks and private planting
There's little shade for the contemplating mind:
Yet though old drums, beast cries and racial ranting
Raise Cain in the thorn-scrub rising round our hearts,
The naked eye, still steady, bright, resigned
Must check, cross check, each reference on its charts.

If, having made a fair and heart-felt choice
To plant ancestral, shade-endowing trees,
The back must bend, yet on rebellious knees
The heart has cause, and cannot but rejoice.
For when the tribal energies, the flames,
The golden sap and blood and plumes conform
And dance down ways the staring eye discloses:
When shapes long stifled in our sensual storm
Strike free and chant their clarifying names,
Who will moan at the strain such work imposes?

O brazen heads, at Ife, you who stare
Over the jungle, down the cataract
As if such staring were the first slow act
By which man masters chaos anywhere,
Stare at me, you bronzes, stare, persist
Till, having caught your straight, incisive gaze
I cut the scrub with calculated glances:
Stare, as I replant, on dazzling days,
Ancestral trees; stare on my sweating fist
In which, this moment, your bloodstream dances, dances.

'Bronze Heads' is, in most respects very similar to 'Home Thoughts'. The structure follows the pattern of narrative followed by application and reflection. Both poems concern the Apollo-Dionysus conflict; both seek a reconciliation. In 'Bronze Heads', however, Butler finds his metaphor in Black Africa, not in civilized Europe. This is a significant departure in that it foreshadows Butler's readiness to face the environment he inhabits. 'Bronze Heads' is a stage nearer the dicovery of an African absolute. The poem 'Myths', began in 1946 but completed at about this time, is another milestone in Butler's journey towards an indigenous identity. It is, however, a more successful poem than its immediate predecessors, chiefly because it is an example of the Butler who shows, rather than tells. Technically the poem looks towards the relaxed, narrative style of the sixties. The speaker relates how, after killing a cobra and noticing its 'cool still-squirming gold' held in his 'ten separate fingers', he becomes aware of the surrounding countryside: seeing, as if for the first time, 'Tall aloes', the 'mat-red patches' of lichens, 'white clouds on the mountain's edge;' all of these suddenly asserting themselves and making their presence felt. The killing of the snake brings him into physical contact with the heart of the countryside so that he now seems to recognise it for what it is. It seems also to be claiming <u>him</u>:

I felt the sun
Gauntlet my arms and cloak my growing shoulders.

The incident leads the speaker to consider how an environment is changed by 'strangers', how nothing remains the same

> ... where a European
> Making the most of a fistful of water, splits
> the brown and grey with wedges of daring green.

These 'invaders' leave only 'tentative footprints' for they are 'uncertain if this/Were part of their proper destiny.' The speaker is himself an invader:

> ...alien,
> Like the sounds on my tongue, the pink on my skin.

His heroes are 'Jason, David, Robin Hood,'; he is lost in the world of European folklore and romance, the young man in 'On First Seeing Florence' who 'favoured...such legendary roads.' He is, appropriately enough, reading Keats's 'Lamia' and 'St Agnes' Eve', and wonders whether a Grecian or Medieval 'dream' could ever belong in Africa, in the unchanged countryside,

> Where aloes and thorns thrust roughly out
> Of the slate-blue shales and purple dolorite.

He seems to doubt the feasibility of the idea, but then recalls an incident when 'the ghosts that books had put' into his thoughts had in fact taken on the 'curious flesh/Of an African incarnation'. The last stanza of the poem, which tells of this incident and also resolves the issue raised above, is worth quoting in full:

> One winter dusk when the livid snow
> On Swaershoek Pass went dull, and the grey
> Ashbushes grew dim in smudges of smoke,
> I stopped at the outspan place to watch,
> Intenser as the purple shades drew down,
> A little fire leaping near a wagon,
> Sending its acrid smoke into the homeless night.

> Patient as despair, eyes closed, ugly,
> The woman stretched small hands towards the flames;
> But the man, back to an indigo boulder,
> Face thrown up into the sky, was striking
> Rivers of sorrow into the arid darkness
> From the throat of a battered, cheap guitar.
> It seemed that in an empty hell
> Of darkness, cold and hunger, I had stumbled on
> Eurydice, ragged deaf forever,
> Orpheus playing to beasts that would or could not hear,
> Both eternally lost to news or rumours of spring.

This is a fine piece of writing, chiefly because of its attention to detail and because of its sensory appeal. The fading light is indirectly indicated in vivid images: 'the livid snow...went dull..' and 'grey/Ashbushes grew dim'. Even the fact that the place is named - 'Swaershoek Pass' - lends specificity. The backdrop is further fleshed out: there is a'fire leaping near a wagon, and 'acrid smoke'. The theme of the poem is hinted at: '..into the homeless night'. Both the man and the woman want contact: she reaching out with her hands to the flames, and he, pouring out his sorrows into the night. But there is no contact and no chance of any. To the speaker they seem to be grotesque versions of Eurydice and Orpheus: Eurydice 'deaf forever', thus never able to respond to his song; and Orpheus, 'playing to beasts that would or could not hear'. The incongruity of the analogy serves only to underline the hopelessness of their desolation.

The speaker's question is answered. A 'Grecian' or 'Medieval' dream cannot belong in Africa. The poem is a rebuttal of the idea that Africa can be interpreted via Europe.

The question of Butler's own belonging has not been settled. He is still the 'eunuch' of 'On First Seeing Florence', wavering between two worlds, hankering after the one whenever he finds himself in the other. Shortly before the publication of 'Stranger to Europe' in 1952, Butler revised a war poem which had previously appeared in 1949, 'The Parting'. The version which appeared in 1952 differs essentially from its

predecessor. The metamorphosis of this poem anticipates the poetry of the sixties. Here is the early version:

The Parting

Slowly they rode to the parting. Above the scar
Of the ridge and the widening wound of the stream
The cheek of the sky was scratched by a shooting star.
A jackal yelped: and a night jar's raucous scream
Shook the dark as, shutting the boundary gate,
He felt underfoot the road's familiar grit.

A pulse beyond the peak. Then from the pass
The engine's headlight shot a long straight ray;
Its metal music over miles of grass
Rose to a roar, then blurred, then died away
To a dimmer, more exciting tripple-beat
Like the throb in his throat or the horses' feet.

Black-gloved bluegums mourning under the moon.
A mongrel yowling in the cinder yard.
White, concrete platform. "Down train due in soon,"
Said in a dry, dead voice by the tired guard,
(But telegraph lines and poles were lines and bars
For the sung goodbye of the Southern stars).

The engine-beat grew louder, louder till
It struck great bass chords from the iron bridge,
Then effortless, ominous, inevitable
It coasted hissing down the last black ridge
Slower, and slower. (But his heart beat fast
In fugues confusing his future and his past).

Then drew up silent and, suddenly, fell asleep
While they stood talking of the need for rain,
The price of wool, or anything to keep
Control of these last minutes of dividing strain.
Each heart beneath its wish, its war, its weight
Was stuttering, inarticulate.

The old man turned, went to the horses. O still
He sees his shoulders darken out of sight,
Still hears the hooves grow dim on the slumbering hill;
Then only the engine hissing at the night,
Only the thought: He's at the boundary gate.
He sees the station lights as he turns to pull it shut.

> But when the whistle drove a sharp spear through
> The unexpecting stillness: when after a minute
> Echoes lapped back hollowly, he knew
> His heart was distance hungry and, hard within it
> A doubt that an arid plain of rock and scrub
> Could be his being's centre, his whole heart's hub;
>
> And as the first jets filled the cylinders
> And all down the train the couplings rang
> And bluegums jerked their fists across the stars -
> O all the danger in him leapt and sang!
> Yet long he leant from the window, wide-eyed, till
> His landscape sank beyond a grave-shaped hill.

This simple sketch of a young man leaving his home, a Karroo farm, to go to war, is a tentative exploration of the tension between the influence of home and the romanticism of battle in foreign lands. As the boy and his father ride to the station, the landscape is pictured as an injured person, foreshadowing the pain of parting from family and 'landscape':

> Above the scar
> Of the ridge and the widening wound of the stream
> The cheek of the sky was scratched by a shooting star.

His home asserts itself in the yelp of a jackal, a nightjar's cry. Gradually they become aware of a different sound, the 'metal music' of the approaching train. This is the beginning of the music motif in the poem. The 'music' of the train dies away to a 'more exciting tripple-beat' and is associated with the 'throb in his throat'. This music signifies the boy's longing for adventure. The telegraph lines and poles, significantly instruments of communication over long distances, are the musical lines and bars for the farewell sung by his home. The noise of the train grows gradually louder, 'till/It struck great bass chords from the iron bridge', setting his heart to beating even faster '(In fugues confusing his future and his past.)' Father and son awkwardly make small talk to disguise the pain; but once his

father has left, the boy is aware only of the engine hissing. 'His heart is distance-hungry.' The excitement rises to a climax, leaving him with

> A doubt that an arid plain of rock and scrub
> Could be his being's centre, his whole life's hub.

As the train leaves, he gazes from the window to see his landscape finally cease to be:

> His landscape sank beyond a grave-shaped hill.

The boy buries his past. The formative and replenishing powers of home are denied.

In the second and final version of the poem the youth's landscape is given greater stature. The self-conscious, strained imagery of a wounded environment is abandoned, and the musical imagery more highly developed. The boy's excitement is pictured as 'dim strumming, like guitars/Heard from a distance', a sensuous representation of the call of other worlds. The 'metal music' motif is retained, as is the image of telegraph poles and wires, but both are given greater significance by being associated with the 'dim strumming' of guitars. The 'great bass chords' which the train strikes on the iron bridge now are more appropriate. In counterpoint to this melody is plotted the farm's own music, initially able to dominate:

> ...two night jars broke
> The starry strumming with their forlorn shriek

but later, after the arrival of the train, forced into submission:

> ... a heart bewildered, fluttering fast
> From the small, now open cage of an empty past.

Thus the voice of the farm, of the past, warning 'Against far countries he was soon to seek', grows powerless. But the farm

has other tunes: vividly sensuous detail complements the night jars' cries, creating tension between the exotic call of distant lands, and the everyday voice of the farm:

> Dismounting to open the creaking boundary gate
> How rough underfoot the track's familiar grit!

The tension between Europe and Africa is established. The arrival of the train brings about a temporary lapse in the power of the home to hold. But when the boy's father turns to leave, the farm speaks again:

> A childish lump in his throat, against his will,
> Watching those shoulders darken out of sight,
> Hearing the hooves grow dim on the slumbering hill...
> Then only the engine hissing at the night:
> Only the thought: He's at the boundary gate.
> He turns. He hears the birds. He feels the grit.

A comparison of this stanza with stanza six of the earlier version reveals Butler's shifting emphasis. The boy's sensory awareness of the farm makes the 'hissing' of the engine less prominent.
As the train leaves, and 'the danger in him leapt and sang', the poem seems to be moving to the same conclusion as its predecessor; but the last two lines hold the change:

> But waiting with cries for other nights and stars,
> Caught in his caging heart, slept two nightjars.

The boy carries his home with him. The earlier denial of the farm's hold on the boy is refuted. The doubt that 'an arid plain' could be 'his being's centre' is repudiated. This essential change in the meaning of the poem indicates that Butler is moving towards the recognition of an absolute in Africa.

CHAPTER FOUR

POEMS OF BELONGING

The decade spanning the late fifties to the late sixties is characterized by verse that is both markedly different from and the conclusion of earlier work. The tension between Africa and Europe no longer plagues Butler's work. He is ready to turn his gaze to Africa, to study her 'furious dances', and to give them 'consciousness and form'. What he sees is pure Dionysian vitality, but the words 'savage' and 'semi-barbarous' disappear from his vocabulary. He can only stare entranced, and celebrate what he has seen in evocatively sensuous imagery. Europe's images and myths no longer suffice to capture what he sees. Butler's idiom is plainly African; simple, and largely unmetaphorical.

This is also predominantly the period of the narrative, though Butler's verse has always revealed a strong narrative element. Many of the war poems are stories, in the sense that they portray a chronological sequence of events. Major poems, such as 'Elegy' and 'On First Seeing Florence', have narrative sections. Both 'Livingstone Crosses Africa' and 'Home Thoughts' are constructed on stories. In all these cases, however, the narrative itself is of secondary importance. The major poems of the sixties are nothing more than stories; or, more correctly, they appear to be nothing more than stories. Whatever 'thought' or 'philosophy' may arise from them appears to be coincidental.

Allied to this feature is the criterion Butler himself outlines in a poem standing on the eve ofthis decade, 'Keeping A Distance', which he wrote in 1956. 'Keeping a Distance' takes another

look at the theme of isolation, but this time from an artist's point of view. The speaker is at a party where he hears the occasional lament for 'old-world cities', now lost to violence, drift through the general hum of conversation. This nostalgia brings to his mind his own childhood, 'remote/Among shrubs, birds, granite and storms'. His past seems immediate; it seems to press on him like the paintings on the wall. Yet he sees the danger of subjectivity:

> No exile, and yet
> To capture trembling in webs of words
> A childhood remote
> Among shrubs, birds, granite and storms
> I must take all
> As lightly and as tenderly as these
> Proud Spaniards, gentle Viennese
> Their childhood in forbidden cities.

To capture the past and keep it alive, the poet needs a delicate touch. 'Without strict distance, no clear vision.' A poem captures a moment freed from the dimensions of Time and Space,

> Motionless as sculpture
> Separate as a star.

This is the kind of isolation a poet needs, though Butler does not often allow himself to have it. His anxiety to be understood makes him intrude on the province of the poem to comment, analyse and explain. The poems of the sixties are allowed to speak for themselves. They show, rather than tell.

These poems deal with specific places, stories and people; they are local and familiar places and people, 'situations from common life' described in 'language really used by men!' 37

'Cradock Mountains' may serve as the manifesto of the poet's credo at this time. The poem is Butler's acknowledgement of the massive formative influence one's environment has on one's life. It is a hymn of praise to the mountains which

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37) Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads, edited by W.J.B. Owen, Anglistica, Vol IX, 1957, Copenhagen, p115, lines 78-81.

...presided over
All the formative forces,
Clouds, winds, characters,
Who planted, nourished, pruned to a basic shape
Whatever I shall carry to the grave.

Rambling free-verse narrations of the speaker's boyhood experiences and the activities of the town convey a real sense of belonging, evident in lines such as these:

Down through your gorges came droves of cattle,
Merinos and Persians herded by Coloureds
With brass-studded belts, or Xhosas with kerries
And unbuttoned ex-army great-coats flapping:

and these:

From orchards and patches of green in your groins
Or broader lands on your lower slopes
Came farmers with children to settle in school,
Dead springboks lashed to the backs of their cars;
To buy and to bargain, to visit the bank
And, once in a quarter, to listen for hours
To sleek-skinned members of parliament trimming
Their quick, forked tongues to your pious vote.

and these:

Stalking your hawk-haunted crags in the sun
I've slipped my two-two riflesfrom my shoulder:
A dassie, old, male, in his wintercoat,
Fur stirred by the little wind,
Snout parallel with the horizon.
Eye held him captive while hand and shoulder
Brought backsight and fore into line with his chest:
But, time and again, I'd lose all focus: sight,
In a foggy fraction, would slip, whip, skim
Beyond him, below, so ricochetting through
Brown and grey of the Brak and the Fish River Valleys
To spend itself in the pale blue ghost of the Teebus
Or smack the blunt butt of the Winterberg.

It is the memory of small, inconsequential detail - the 'brass-studded belts' of the Coloured herders, the springboks 'lashed to the backs of the trucks', the dassie, 'old, male, in his winter-coat' that reveals the speaker's love and care. Against the back-drop of Cradock Mountains, the narrative poems of the

sixties range freely.

'Surveyor', taken from the unpublished play Two Timers, tells of a surveyor's struggle to construct a road in the Congo, and of the endless problems that face him:

The road gangs
always at the throats of the villagers
who always overcharged them
for booze, and yams, and girls.
Many on both sides died bewitched.
Each pay day bred a bout of gambling
followed by stabbings, frequently fatal.
Not to mention the normal snags, like malaria
And the run of tropical bugs. The Doctor himself went down,
all his quinine dumped in a swamp by a careless coon.

Growing desperate, he decides to call a meeting 'to try/ democracy, diplomacy'. For hours he mediates between the 'bush pagans' of the area and the 'invaders' but to no avail:

They heard failure in my voice.
I'd lost my grip and they saw it
in my fidgeting nicotined fingers.

Finally, exhausted and defeated, he rises to dismiss them, but to his own and everyone else's amazement announces:

In any right-angled triangle
the square on the hypotenuse
equals the sum of the square on the other two sides.

There follows a 'baffled silence', and a moment of sanity, during which the surveyor's authority is re-established. All quarelling ceases. The work continues, because

All Africa's black witch-doctors,
all her white orators,
all the dizzy word-spinners of the world
could not refute that proposition.

The fact that it is entirely irrelevant in the context is neither here nor there. The proposition represents the only sanity

in that mad gathering. Apollonian clarity restrains Dionysian chaos.

From this early poem many of the enduring qualities of Butler's narrative verse may be discerned. The simplicity of style and ease with which free verse is handled result in a conversational tone. It seems, in fact, as if the speaker intends no more than a friendly chat. There is nothing elevated here. The poet has deserted his pedestal; he seems to be leaning across a bar, speaking idly across a beer. Metaphor is free from complexity, its implications obvious: 'they wrangled for hours in a green nightmare...' The poem also has human touches, brief sketches of people revealing accuracy of observation. These sketches are often tinged with humour; the speaker pokes fun at himself, seated 'like Solomon' in his 'canvas chair'. The chair becomes a 'throne', ludicrously ironic in the context of his hitherto dismal failure to bring about any kind of reconciliation. Even his eventual success is only accidentally achieved and has little to do with wisdom. In the same humorous vein the rest of the assembly is fleshed out:

> a tall mine boy with flashing aluminium helmet,
> a chap in dungarees with ear plugs the size of saucers,
> and a suave young slikkie, lounge-suited for the occasion,
> who thought he spoke Oxford English.

A more profound confrontation with Dionysus occurs in the three African poems that follow. The speaker in 'Tourist Insight Into Things' begins in the same chatty way:

> I've often thought, well, our big black underdog,
> you can't expect to turn him into a spaniel
> simply by feeding him sugar cubes, even
> the very best sugar, the most refined.

He explains that 'our big black brother' has much to teach us,

provided we are prepared to become aware of our 'own dark life-blood' as he is. He is still primitive, still clinging to his old customs and gods, so much so that even Lawrence's fascination with tribal mysteries would have been gratified here in Africa. He concludes:

> Africans, like their continent are not dark
> for nothing. Their darkness is alive.

In contrasting the Western way of killing beasts - the speedy, efficient deliverance with the aid of 'an hygienic machine' - with the Africans' ritual, he arrives at the turning point in the poem. With the statement, 'All over Africa all cattle are sacred', we are led into the narrative, and the story of how Africans kill an ox is unfolded. Tension begins to mount almost immediately; the scene is set for battle. Twelve of the 'best and glossiest' young braves, 'unarmed, naked', approach their adversary, the strongest, glossiest bull, which 'lowers a horn-span five feet wide at them'. The braves seize the horns, 'wrestle the beast to its knees', and proceed to render it powerless by lifting a hindleg over its horn. The bull now lies 'careened on its right side'. The best brave, using a specially sharpened assegaai, now cuts through the midriff, inserts his right hand 'more than elbow deep', and squeezes the aorta until the bull dies.

As the story develops, the speaker withdraws, the conversational tone fades and a tone of awe takes its place. This objectivity, or artistic detachment, is a feature of this poem, and of many poems of this period. Butler is keeping his distance.

The description is characterised by colour, sound, and movement, all of these factors contributing a vivid effect. Thus, as the braves tackle the bull, 'Black, pink-palmed hands leap, seize'. Later, as it is grounded, 'its breath in spurts/blows

up a smoke of powdered dung,' while all round it 'sweating black bodies/glisten under the stinging sun.' The physical sensation of touch plays a major role, for the act of killing is performed by the human hand. The poem, too, depends on sensory appeals. The chosen brave thrusts his hand to find the heart. The speaker seems dumbfounded by what he describes: 'He holds a bull's heart beating in his hand.'

A mystical force is operating here, passing from bull to man, and thence to the rest of the tribe who are spectators and yet active participants. It is transferred in sound. Throughout the poem, sound is stressed. The bellowing of the bull is a powerful symbol;

> ...fathers, chieftains, ancestors
> remember the deep bull voice long after they have forgotten
> that silly sophistication, speech.

It is answered by the young man's chant, the 'communal clapping of hands by old and young,' and by 'a great wave of singing,' growing in volume as the bull's cries grow in strength. This communication between beast and man establishes a sensual relationship, resulting in a mystical union which is the fibre of African life:

> While hills and echoes carry the bull's last bellow
> to the last of the ancestors, the laughing-singing-clapping wave
> tumbles, sparkles, spreads in bubbles and spume
> through the veins and the brains,
> the nerves and the bloods of all that is African
> on both sides of the grave.

The sound of the bull roaring, the people singing and clapping binds the poem and this unity is supported by the poet's own tuneful diction and rhythm:

> Thrusting deeper, deeper, he finds
> the root of life, root of the arteries, the aorta itself
> beating out its dithyramb.

Butler's fascination for Dionysus spills over into the next of the African poems, 'Isibongo of Matiwane.' In a series of comparisons with animals and natural phenomena drawn from tribal life, Matiwane's mystical power is vividly sketched:

> moves over the earth with the speed of a startled gnu:
> lowered bull's head, hooves of thunder,
> to whom danger is swift as the air:
> black cloud from whom blue lightnings break, piercing the folded thighs
> Of the curving Lebombo mountains.
> He goes forth like the sun,
> we shield our eyes with our hands.

Touches of the supernatural reinforce this effect:

> I have seen a butterfly splashed with patches of colour
> quickly shut its wings when caught in the blaze of his glance.

A Venda legend is the subject of the third of these poems, 'Drum of the Dead.' Like 'Isibongo of Matiwane', this poem celebrates the mystical, superhuman power of the chief of the tribe. The legend tells of how the Venda were punished for splitting into factions fighting, and killing amongst each other to the extent that even the 'Drum of the Dead', the 'voice of their fathers', had no effect upon them. The gods sent a great drought, so that at last the crippled nation approached the revered house of their chief, Mwali, and the house of the Drum to solicit ancestral aid with the help of the high priest, Dzoma-laDzimu. The priest took their plea to the king, thereafter imploring the ancestors to speak by means of the Drum. The Drum began to beat, the king awaited interpretation, and Dzoma-la-Dzimu delivered the message to the people. It was a message of doom.

> I shall hide myself in the earth, and leave you the dry sky only,
> I shall crack the earth apart and your cattle shall sink away.

This awful retribution killed many people, but soon nearly all of them were wiped out when thunder and lightning struck the gathering. Even the king and the Drum were destroyed. As the survivors struggled away, hyenas and jackals moved in.

It is of the first stanza of 'Drum of the Dead' that Plomer said that Butler succeeded in capturing sounds 'truly African'.[38] The frequent use of African words and names contributes towards this effect: 'Lemba', 'deze', 'Tsonga', 'kudu', 'impala', 'Tshaula', 'tshizambo', 'ntusa', 'mulala'. These words have inherent musical qualities. Butler has also applied musical effects: alliteration establishes an echo of the 'deze's' music in 'well tuned metal tongues.' It helps to create the percussive effect of the xylophones in 'rippled with pink palms or padded hammers'. Assonance evokes the sound of the Venda's bamboo flutes:

> many blew upon sable horns, kudu, or horns of impala,
> or flutes of special bamboo from the sacred woods of Tshaula.

The pattern established in the first stanza is sustained throughout the poem.

The most variously applied device is repetition. Isolated instances of repeated words or phrases create a curious and complex effect; in one instance only is the device used for emphasis: 'quiet, quiet they were'. A more frequent application may be seen in the following examples:

> drum of their fathers/ drum of the dead
> . . . .
> Impregnable walls of stone, houses also of stone,
> in the midst whereof the drum's house stood, whose walls
>
> were gleaming granite slabs, whose roof was great beams.

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38) Guy Butler: South of the Zambezi; (Abelard Schuman, London, New York, 1966), p 3.

> In silence he returned, ...in silence/approached the...
> But the king's dogs, they hear, hear and rise...

These repetitive structures create rhythmic regularity in a poem which purposefully avoids metre. They also suggest a rhetorical style. Butler captures a melody akin to the tuneful and lilting speech of the African. In some cases lines are repeated in slightly altered form: 'many blew upon sable horns, kudu, or horns of the impala' in the first stanza, returns as 'with a blowing of sable horns, kudu, and horns of the impala' in the eleventh stanza. These 'refrains' help to unite the various sections of the poem, and help to establish the aura of inevitability as the legend works its way to a predictable end.

All of this is not to deny the role played by the telling of the story itself. Butler employs several different narrative styles. After the introductory stanza referred to above, we are plunged into the mysticism of the legend, as the origin of the drum is recounted:

> But only the Venda possessed a drum of their fathers
> carried countless leagues from a land of gleaming lakes,
> a land of forests and fruits, innumerable moons ago,
> till they founded their city at last in the mountains of
> Vuvha.

We are in the never-never land of the story, under the rule of superstition, 'where snakes with a head at each end keep slithering watch'. Contrasted with this atmosphere of mystery is the remote 'historical' style of

> The years passed. In the time of my great grandfather
> the people split into factions...

Yet another contrast occurs as the emotional climax of the poem is reached:

> Alone, with the sacred stick, he enters the house of
> the drum.

Varying styles vary the mood of the poem, heightening the reader's interest.

Butler's attraction to primitive African life is more than a passing anthropological fancy. It is the result of a reconsideration of fundamental values. The simplification of existence into a dichotomy of reason and intuition lies at the root of all his poetry. Initially it is nothing more than a vague realization; 'Live through the body' is the uncompromishing advice of the adolescent.

Warm admiration and forlorn envy colour his depiction of the Servant Girl, singing a song which is integral with her natural surroundings. In the war poetry, the dichotomy develops into a conflict between the mechanical and the passionate, the present and the past, the foreign and the familiar, the non-human and the human. He cannot disguise his sympathy for the batman, the 'desperate maudlin hedonist'. In the post war poetry, he labels this dualism: Apollo, and Dionysus. The leaning has been toward the intuitive, the primitive, passion. Yet he must first see Florence. He must have order, reason. He must bring reason to primitive Africa. Above all else, he must re-examine primitive Africa. This re-examination gives rise to a new Butler:

> ...the sight of a child or a primitive will arouse certain longings in adult, civilised persons - longings which relate to the unfulfilled desires and needs of those parts of the personality which have been blotted out of the total picture in favour of the adopted persona. 39

Butler's adopted European persona loses ground in these poems. Like Jung, Butler needed to uncover that which had been repressed:

> In travelling to Africa to find a psychic observation post outside the sphere of the European I unconsciously wanted to find that part of my personality which had become invisible under the influence and pressure of being European. 40

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39) C.G. Jung: Memories, Dreams, Reflections, (London, Collins, 1961), p272.

40) Ibid. p272.

It is Butler's African persona that celebrates the intuitive forces in the lives of the African which are the subjects of these poems. When he turns to the 'Europeans', the farmers, he sees the same forces and he can now recognise them for what they are.

He can, however, still slip into the European point of view. 'Pilot' the least successful of the narrative poems, fails for that very reason. The poem relates two anecdotes, both concerning attempts by a fun-hungry group of soldiers to scare wild animals by flying over them in an aeroplane. They drive a troupe of baboons into a state of hysteria, but fail to make an impression on a herd of elephants. The anecdotes are well told, displaying the familiar qualities of observation and skilful recording of detail. The final section of the poem, however, seeks to utilise these stories for the sake of making a political point. The speaker meets a 'journalist type' in a pub, who comments on the growing unrest in townships, comparing the blacks to baboons. He is shocked into demanding 'A double, for Chrissake, quick!' when the speaker suggests that the blacks resemble 'elephants on the move'.

The same reverence of the Black African ethos evident in 'Tourist Insight into Things' is present in one of the most successful of the narrative poems, 'Grave Robbers,' actually an excerpt from the radio play, <u>A Scattering of Seed</u>. This poem displays some of the qualities that lead to the conclusion that the period under discussion is the highlight in Butler's career: the simplicity of the story - nothing more than an anecdote of two boys' thwarted efforts to satisfy their Darwinian curiosity - the simplicity of the style - informal, almost prosaic free verse, with the occasional colloquialism - humour at personal cost. But above all, there is a sense of place, a nostalgic, affectionate

subscription to the formative influence of home. This last mentioned quality is evident in the very first lines of the poem where loving attention to detail reveals the speaker's delight in the crude simplicity of his surroundings:

> The stable still had a cobbled floor,
> bull horns set in the old line-plastered walls
> for hanging saddles and harness, and a long, worn
> yellow-wood crib with rough iron hitching-rings
> and a horse shoe for luck nailed over the door.

As though the boys sense the importance of the discovery of an old Martini-Henry, they turn the stable into a museum. Feverishly they commit their subsequent finds to posterity; they are quite indiscriminate:

> ...everything the town and the veld and the rubbishtips
> could yield to the magpie hand and eye
> of a piratical boy...

The past is dug up and preserved, subtly influencing the present. There is only one 'serious gap':

> ...no bone of Man...

At this point black Africa intrudes. The boys watch a funeral procession passing the house. The deceased is Deacon Jali, 'a good man, Ma'am', explains Susan, the servant. Mention of the dead man's distant relationship with the girl prophetess, Nonquasi, thrusts an aura of mysticism into the atmosphere of the poem. In the obituary to Deacon Jali which follows, the speaker has stepped back, as in 'Tourist Insight Into Things', the style expands mellifluously, and the rhythm yields to the lilt of a church service, complete with responses:

> The Lord was good to Joseph and blessed his work.
> In his time he baptised thousands of people
> into the fold of the Lord.
>
> Deacon Jali is dead.

Jali's faith, the faith he inspires, dispells the witchery of Nonquasi, and challenges the domain of reason:

> Doves descending from the sky
> were nore than mere Darwinian birds
>
> come down from the hills to drink.
>
> Deacon Jali is dead.

In the dying light of that day, Jali is laid to rest haloed by the tint of 'the blood of the Lamb in the evening sun.'

A sombre mood displaces the lightheartedness of the boys as they visit what they believe to be a disused cemetery 'in the sacred name of knowledge'. Their destination is a donga 'scoured' 'through the cemetery from end to end' where they hope to find human bones. But they never reach the donga. Their already brittle nerve is shattered when they come face to face with Jali's grave, recognising it by its 'bread-brown wreath/of shrivelled marigolds'.

It is with a new-found uncomplicated frankness that Butler sings his admiration of the civilised primitive, the farmer: the farmer's authority over his land and labourers, and his responsibility to these, are stressed in a sustained metaphor:

> That sandstone stoep, festooned with bits of biltong,
> is the bridge of his liner. From there he pilots
> three thousand morgan of good Karroo veld
> through sizzling doldrums of drought and stormy good seasons;
>
> barks laconic orders at the 'boys'
> who, wringing stained hats in yellow hands,
> cringe on the blue gravel deck three feet below him.

As the picture expands it is recognised as a generalization, a fact which the poet realises:

A caricature? Of course.

With the introduction of a speaker in stanza six comes the kind of first-hand detailed description that contributes so heavily to the success of these poems. Here the speaker takes a closer look; he is now examining a real person:

> I turned my gaze
> away from the clean slow folds of the veld
> and looked, as a painter might, acutely,
> at the heavy body in old bleached khaki,
> elbows on knees, the brandy glass
> held by both hands in front of him, firm.
>
> At first glance his eyes seemed like a hunter's,
> every wrinkle and line from crowsfoot to frown
> pointing towards the clear grey orbs, alert,
> watching something loved but treacherous.

The mystical relationship between man and his environment discerned in the African poems is evident here too:

> he'd taken all that he saw into himself
> and found that it was good;

So intimate are his ties with the land that he seems to have lost the capacity for meaningful human relationships: his wife is 'unloved' and 'sad'; his 'surly son' waits patiently for the old man's death and his inheritance; his only daughter is

> living it up among the neon lights
> down at the wicked Bay.

He is essentially a lonely person, isolated by his total subscription to the demands of the land. Beyond the borders of the farm lie only 'the great nonsensical world'. In his attitude to his land 'his poise was absolute'.

Isolation is the theme of the second of the character studies of this period, 'Great-great-grandmother'. In contrast to 'Farmer', this poem portrays the inability to identify with surroundings, the absence of a sense of belonging. The subject

is the speaker's great-great-grandmother, whose home was

> ...over the water, among
> hills called the Cotswold

She rarely spoke

> ...of things we never knew, like snow
> like chestnuts, and nightingales, whose hillsides
> deep in perpetual lawns with not a stone to be seen,
> trees, without thorns, as high as the house, things
> as lovely, strange and barely credible
> as Chapters in the Bible.

Her emotional isolation is prefigured in the gradual loss of her senses. First 'her sight grew dim', so that someone had to read to her, but 'deafness following shut that door.' The speaker doubts that she could have had any sense of touch left 'In fingers as dry and shiny as silver leaves...' She withdrew from reality, gathering round her 'the shawl with which she seemed to shelter/her loneliness like a deformity.'

Even human relationships had gone:

> Alone. Husband and all her own children gone:

At this point the story of how she died is taken up. The speaker recalls seeing her standing in the garden, unaware of an approaching whirlwind. The wind struck her frail body into a pomegranate tree. The injuries she sustained proved fatal. The speaker felt little remorse then, but now that he is older he is beginning to realize the significance of her role in the establishment of a new nation: this role becomes an allegory because of the Biblical symbolism Butler has woven into the poem.

In stanza nine the pomegranate is described as 'flaming yellow', and later, in stanza thirteen, her dress looks like a branch 'in the flame of the bush'. There is a clear suggestion of the burning bush in which God appeared to Moses to set him the task of leading his people out of Egypt to the Promised Land.

The allusion gathers strength when the whirlwind is described as

> the holy pillar of smoke that led the Israelites
> into the Promised Land.

The great-great-grandmother is Moses, who, having led her people to the Promised Land - South Africa - , has performed her task, and is claimed by that which inspired her. She also resembles Elijah:

> She's been taken up to heaven, like Elijah!
> And her shawl spun out of the sky and settled beside me.
> Was I Elisha, inheriting
> her mantle of powerful pain?

Her 'pain', a burden of loneliness, is passed onto the speaker; his is the task of further establishing the new nation in a new land. She has sacrificed her love for her own land for the sake of the family. Like Jesus, she dies with bleeding palms:

> In her fall she had clutched at the thorny branches.
> That's how the palms of her hands were pierced.

Endowed with extraordinary qualities, she is Butler's arch-matriarch. She is no different from the farmer. She belongs too; but to a different world.

Narrative technique, a conversational tone, the use of appropriate colloquialism, symbolism, dialogue, free verse and an objectivity controlled with consummate skill all fuse in the most successful poem of this period, and perhaps Butler's finest poem to date. 'Sweet-Water', written in the early sixties, was first published in The Cape Argus of Saturday, May 25, 1963. Its publication was followed by a spate of letters of congratulations; in Butler's own words, the poem yielded 'the largest and most touching fan-mail that has ever come my way.[41]

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41) From a letter quoted in The Cape Argus, July 6, 1963.

There are several reasons for the poem's immediate and widespread success. One of these is a sentimental one: many of the 'fan' letters testify to the readers' nostalgia, praising the poet for successfully striking a chord in their hearts: sparking off reminiscences of happy and fulfilled childhoods, or of favourite spots in nature, or of the Karroo life depicted in the poem. Another reason is the strong characterisation in the poem; in Uncle Danby and Aunt Betsy, Butler has trapped everything that is typical of the people he knew as a boy. There is an element of the caricature in them too: both are easily recognisable stock figures, though Danby escapes that restriction as the poem progresses. The third and most significant reason is that 'Sweet-Water' is, in the first place, poetry for the people in a way that 'On First Seeing Florence', 'Livingstone Crosses Africa' and 'Home Thoughts' are not. In the dozen odd poems of this period, and in 'Sweet-Water' in particular, Butler establishes an idiom which fills the need in this country for 'folk' poems. In 1959 Butler wrote:

> South African poetry is not, and never has been, a poetry with popular roots. We have no popular songs. If an English South African overseas wants to express <u>Heimweh</u> in song, he has to resort to Afrikaans or Zulu. We have no anonymous ballad literature either, no folk songs, although our noisy history is packed with suitable incidents One possible explanation for this silence (as for so much else) is the presence of cheap indigenous labour: it meant that the lonely, ruminative jobs of herding sheep and cattle were done by others; and that the bucolic muse in English was deprived of the mouthpiece which it found in the United States. A stronger factor may have been lack of sufficient time and isolation. Our frontiers were not remote from ports or educational centres for long enough.[42]

'Sweet-Water' is a 'popular song'.

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42) Guy Butler (selector): A Book of South African Verse, (O.U.P., Cape Town, 1959) p xix

The poem is an anecdote concerning an occasion when the speaker, a young man, and his uncle and aunt were on their way to town. His uncle, Danby, was in a reflective mood, nostalgically recalling his own childhood, when his family used to stop at the Kwaai River:

> "we always outspanned for the night,
> here, among these trees.
> There's no sweeter water
> in all the district."

To make good his boast, Danby stopped the car on the causeway and, deaf to the protestations of Aunt Betsy, led his nephew up the river to a pool. Here he knelt, carefully blew a film of dust off the surface of the water, and drank, inviting the speaker to join him.

Throughout the poem the narrative is accompanied by vivid, sensuous imagery. The opening lines evoke a host of smells, sights, tastes:

> While packing gold butter, lace doilies, buck biltong,
> spring chickens, frilled aprons, cut flowers, dried peaches
> into the boot and back seat of the car,....

Thus in sensuous pictures the flavour of life in that district is conveyed. In the same way the surroundings are give substance by strong appeals to our auditory sense:

> In silence we sailed with white winter grasses
> swishing the mudguards; silence, enlarged
> by the drone of the engine, by a startled korhaan
> rising, clattering, into the sky: silence
> seeping from petrified seas...

The Kwaai River with its 'tawdry fringe of mimosas' is starkly contrasted with 'our red-road-ribbon'.

Closely allied to this sensuous simplicity is Butler's extensive use of colloquialism and South African words and names.

Words like 'biltong', 'korhaan', 'kopjies', 'concertinas', and names like 'Boesak', 'Kwaai River', 'Sarie Marais', and 'Karroo', do much to impart local colour.

Equally effective are Butler's attempts at phonetically transcribing the people's dialectic peculiarities and speech mannerisms:

> Them Pommie Awficers
> in the Bah Wah

and

> opened last month by our M.P.C.
> with a speets on nashonil prowgriss

and the use of 'man' in constructions such as

> my brothers and me
> we drove stock to the fair.
>
> What I remember best
> was dust.
> Man, I must
> Of swallowed a muid or two...

These features assist in the establishment of a conversational tone in the poem. As in 'Surveyor' and 'Grave Robbers', the personality of the speaker plays an important role in the story. There is the ironic attitude in the occasional humorous touch:

> Aunt Betsy, convener of twenty committees
> and big queen bee of the church bazaar
> ....
> When Uncle Danby took the wheel,
> his hands would hover, seize it, feel
> it for tension like one who tries
> the reins of a horse who sometimes shies...
> ....
> At the word 'feather' Aunt Betsy's hand
> Unconsciously fluttered towards her antique hat.
> ....

but his attitude is neither contemptuous nor patronising. The speaker's identification with the object of his good-

natured mockery is evident in lines such as 'O concertinas and moonlight/and singing of Sarie Marais', and in the deep longing of the final lines of the poem:

> He's dead now, and I am left
> bereft...

Butler's use of dialogue in the poem is central to his efforts to create living people. Thus the distinction between Danby and Aunt Betsy is clear from the way they speak: contrasted with Aunt Betsy's nervous, imperative mood statements, eg. '"Boesak! Where's master? Find him."' is the leisurely, reflective conversation of Uncle Danby: '"Man, when I was a boy..."' This creates a dramatic tension, particularly when Danby stops the car:

> Aunt Betsy sat up with a start: "What?-"
> "Man, when I was a boy," he said.
> "Danby!" she cried, "We're half-an-hour late!"

The direct speech also assists the narrative. Danby's step-by-step account of how to go about tasting this 'sweet water' interpolating the thoughts and impressions of the speaker, subtly brings the poem to a climax, preparing the way for the symbolic conclusion: the moment he stops the car his mind leaps the sixty-odd years that separate him from his childhood; he then proceeds to relive the experience, recalled for us in direct speech:

> "When I was a boy," he said,
> "we always outspanned for the night,
> here, among the trees.
> There's no sweeter water
> in all the district."
>
> .....
>
> "Now," he said, "you must first
> blow the dust from the surface, like this."
>
> .....
>
> "Now scoop the water with your hand..."
>
> .....
>
> "Now," he said, "now,
> O taste how sweet it is."

It is, of course, in the creation of Danby that the poem triumphs most resoundingly. Danby is something of an anachronism. This 'selfish old dreamer' clearly belongs to the past. He drives his car as though it were a horse, feeling the wheel for tension as though it were reins. In his thoughts too Danby belongs to a past age. He loves to talk of the past; and once his mind has been cast back to its beginnings, it is not easily recalled. He is an embodiment of Butler's own reverence of the past. In him the poet has found an absolute, a symbol of permanence, inseparably linked with the past, and therefore able to make meaningful sense of the present. In this sense the character of Danby assumes symbolic importance. Yet he is portrayed in a touchingly human way.

Danby moves in a setting that is itself heavy with history. The silence that surrounds the travellers as they motor through the Karroo is given ancestry:

> ...silence
> seeping from petrified seas in the sandstone, so huge...

The pool from which he drinks is in the bend of the river

> ...
> where seventy centuries had scooped a bowl
> in the crazily-cracked sub-stratum of gravel.

The vast and relentless workings of nature form a natural backdrop against which man's actions of 'the fractional present' are performed.

'Sweet-Water' is the culmination of Butler's search for an African absolute. It is a poem which deals in specifics: a chunk of specific local history. Yet its most enduring quality is its universality. The sweet water that the speaker despairs of even discovering for himself remains a widely suggestive, universally applicable symbol: Danby drinks of his past, of the past of the country, of his family. That the speaker doubts whether he could find such a stream, and offer someone a drink, is an indictment of our modern times.

CHAPTER FIVE

RECENT POEMS

The poem 'Whoever-whatever-you-are', written in 1968, is in many ways a pointer to the nature of the poetry of the seventies. The poem is a plea for newness; new themes, ideas, and perspectives. The tone is anxious and pleading. The speaker blames his preoccupation with 'old flames and infantile fears' for his feeling of isolation:

> Perhaps you think I am merely
> a forbidding penal island on which
> old flames and infantile fears
> mutter treason, or madness -

He is uneasy about the thought of severing himself completely from the past:

> if I were to set them free
> what would I do, what would I be?

We are on familiar Butler ground: 'If you have a feeling for the past, you have the assurance that the chaos and the excitements that occur in the present will be integrated...' he writes in Karoo Morning.[43] His uneasiness is, however, counterbalanced by his enthusiasm:

> Come, now eyes,
> take nothing for granted...
>
> I open the gates
> I let them go.

---

43) See p13 of this thesis.

They take a long time to quit their cells.

I do not like the way some look at me;

I like it less when they don't even look behind.

And still you do not come.

This is an echo of Yeats's problem in 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', one of his Last Poems, just as 'Whoever-whatever-you-are' is one of Butler's last poems. Yeats too has reached the end of the road with 'old themes'; but in examining the origin of 'Those masterful images' which formed his poems he realizes that they arise from humble, inglorious beginnings:

Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till.

His only course is to remain with these:

Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and bone shop of the heart.

Butler too reaches the conclusion that he cannot abandon the past, nor cling to it. He must allow it freedom, but acknowledge its existence and influence: therein lies a new course. The old provides the new.

'Whoever-whatever-you-are' is itself new in another respect, namely style. The relaxed, lengthy narrative verse of the sixties has made way for a tense, more tightly organised free verse, lacking both the abundance of natural imagery of the war poems and the intellectualised imagery of the poems of the fifties. It is a simple, sparse style: every word seems to have been considered with great care:

Come.
The hour is yours,
the invitation open and urgent.
Come.

This economy and directness is in evidence in many of the poems of this decade. Butler seems to have reached a level of objectivity where the personality of the speaker has been neutralised; the poems speak directly to the reader. There is no consciousness of an anonymous war-creature, a thoughtful philosophiser, or an envious European looking at Africa; there is simply a man, who is about to attempt to answer the question:

> How can we draw ourselves out of ourselves?

These lines from 'Mountain' clarify the problem:

> Perhaps that moment which refused so firmly
> to be a turning point
> should be the only point
> round which my life should turn;
> perhaps God is neither old nor young;
> in depth or in height. He simply is,
> and we,
> when we accept Him simply,
> are.

As if to demonstrate the truth of the hypothesis that the new springs from the old, Butler devotes part of the collection which appeared in 1978, Songs and Ballads, to the specific aim of recreating settler history in verse. English-speaking South Africans 'have not one popular ballad to cover their cultural nakedness' he lamented in 1949, and several of these Songs and Ballads are attempts to fill that gap. 'The Old Man's Fiddle' and 'Thomas Philipps's Picnic 1821' are typical examples. Both ballads concern the question of settling in a new land, and portray aspects of the British Settlers' early life in this country.

The narrative in 'The Old Man's Fiddle' spans several years, beginning with the family's arrival:

Five people we stood round our goods on the sand,
The old man, my mother, John, Sarah and me:

Gradually the new country claims the lives of members of the family. These calamities are, however, treated with the objectivity typical of the ballad:

'It's as it should be,
So hand me my fiddle
And thank the good Lord
For a fair memory.'
So we sang to his fiddle
Sarah and me
Sarah and me.

As the young man, the sole survivor in the strange land, shows his deceased father the girl he intends to marry, he receives more than approval:

By next Janu'ree
Come with a new fiddle
And thank the good Lord
For a child that's to be;
And anybe we'll hear it,
Your mother, John, Sarah and me,
Your mother, John, Sarah and me.

The request reveals the theme: only news of a new generation, a new chance to survive and settle, can comfort the dead. The fiddle, which has up to now provided music of the old country, lies smashed: 'Come with a new fiddle'. The promise of a future is given.

This ballad, then, celebrates special qualities of the poet's forebears. In the speaker's resignation to what has to be: 'It's as it should be...', and the enforced gaiety provided by the regularity of metre and rhyme of the ballad form, Butler achieves the light touch that is lacking in earlier attempts at praising the indomitable courage and will to survive of the Settlers. 'The Old Man's Fiddle', for all that it is a

simple song, lilting to the tune of a fiddle, is more impressive than these serious, sententious lines from 'Bronze Heads':

> You smug inheritors of landscapes where
> Each gentle acre praises long generations
> Who taught it what clothes and when to wear;
> O heirs to bridge and byre and buttressed wall,
> Imagine that chisel chipping, those first foundations,
> Brand new, without a precedent at all.

These lines labour the sense; the established tone of the poem is serious and aloof, yet the feeling generated verges on sentimentality. By contrast 'The Old Man's Fiddle' makes the same point simply and gaily, and gets its message across by understatement rather than by head-on pontification.

'Thomas Philipps's Picnic 1821' exploits the incongruity between a British immigrants social occasion and the wild African environment. The poem is a conscious effort to re-create a slice of Settler history. It grew, explains the poet in the Introduction to <u>Songs and Ballads</u>, from pp94-6 of <u>Thomas Philipps, 1820 Settler</u>, edited by Arthur Keppel-Jones.[44] It is, however, more than mere history, for the contrast between people and setting gains momentum, culminating in a double perspective. Each stanza underlines the contrast. Here Butler employs the diction of the British literary tradition:

> As rubicund as the very best wine,
> And happily drifting down Lethe's dark stream,
> Our worthy but weary Doctor O'Flynn
> Is soon not sure where his homesick dream
> And this African picnic end of begin.
> All around his Elysian wherry
> He is hearing the pipers of Kerry
> And never
> O never

---

44) Keppel-Jones, A: <u>Thomas Philipps, 1820 Settler</u>, (Pietermaritzburg, Shuter and Shooter, 1960)

> The noises of jackals and river horses
> And the tune
> Of the crickets, and, yes, of the moon,
> and the sharp strange stars in their courses.

Two Black children, hiding behind rocks, are given the task of considering whether these strange beings are really human:

> And under those beautiful clothes
> Are their bodies like ours stung by desire?

The implication is obvious of course, and the poem ends in a reconciliation of primitive and civilized values, implied by the juxtaposition of Xhosa and English words:

> Abafaz', the belles, amadod', the beaux,
> Amadod' abafaz', the beaux and the belles.

The use of Xhosa reduces the subjects to mere mortals, and again, as in 'The Old Man's Fiddle,' the social promise of a mutual co-existence is given. Thus, from the old, Butler creates the new. In this respect, these ballads are successful, but they are not truly representative of the Butler of this period. In most of the poems of this period, Butler expresses doubt whether the ideal he cherishes in these Settler poems could ever become reality.

'Dream of a Buffer Strip' written in the mid-fifties is a rebuttal of this ideal. The poem is a fantasy, as the title suggests. The lack of punctuation enacts its dreamlike coherent incoherence of image running into image: lines and stanzas flow into a continuous whole creating the apparent confusion characteristic of a dream. Yet from this mass of thoughts and impressions in which seemingly incongruous details are yoked together, Butler crystallises a perspective that is startling and bitter.

The poem depicts a visit to a buffer strip between Black and White, a guided tour through an area we recognise as a Black township, a location in fact:

DREAM OF A BUFFER STRIP

I

on twisted strands of wire
a newspaper splits in the wind
hairy goats with gold eyes
nibble at blood red rags

where are we walking to
through what half-lit spaces

dead grass glinting like needles
criss-crossed by dust-soft foot-paths
as white and long as weals

the sun like scarlet fever
rolls scalding over the brim
three gaunt rough skinned donkeys
lift long jaws to bray
black holes through the pallid sky

eyes an innocent ice-blue
under his pilot's cap
david livingstone
opens his pocket bible

in chapter one st john's
apocalypse we read
and every eye shall see him
also they which pierced him

i see through binoculars
our new jerusalem
galvanised iron mirrors
reflecting golden sun
and all encircled by
a ten foot fence steel poles
and glittering diamond mesh

from it zigs and zags
through dark red flesh of earth
a donga's panga gash
patched and bandaged in places
with ash and rubbish tips
pinned by broken bedsteads
rusty roofing strips

and as it crawls towards us
leaks pools of yellow pus
stitched all around their edges
with coarse kikuyu grass
green suckers cling and catch at
our leggings and our boots

suddenly from the sky
a falling fountain of joy
rain on a mountain top
high laughter, airy excitement
of boys at reckless play

an innocent river of jordan
comes romping through my bones
my son and his friends must be
playing cops and robbers
along the banks of our river

it isn't my son playing
in the panga gash below,
five black picannins
in nakedness and rags
four are squatting teasing
stag-beetles to make them fight
the fifth by himself at the drift
is gathering blue smooth pebbles
dropping each with a click
into an old jam tin

the wire Y of his catty
dangles by red elastics
from the lizard-shiny blackness
of his thin left wrist

he is the first to see us

at his animal cry
quick they forget their play
stare hard at us start sidling
out of our sight towards
galvanised iron mirrors
reflecting the golden sun
all encircled by
a ten foot fence steel poles
and glittering diamond mesh

but number five stands firm

a catapult in hand
and pebbles at his feet
it's all happened before
its going to happen again
he'll slip a blue smooth pebble
into that primitive sling

watch out i yell watch out
darting my hand to my forehead
cracking under the strain

but david livingstone
shakes his lion's mane
both of you are afraid
and fear well fear hath torment
says the word of god
moreover the child is ill

i look at the child again
i see or rather hear
what holds him lonely there
outfacing our giant faces
under a cent-sized sun

he has trouble with his breathing
hisses hard for air
look he's fallen backwards
limbs slowly snatch at air
an outsize upturned tortoise

i giggle with relief

the pebbles spill from their tin

enormous leaden ripples
circle the yellow pool

huge six-legged beetles
lumber into holes
like craters on the moon.

II

footfalls receding cries
cries closer footfalls and then
mimosa smoke tobacco
smell of servant's clothes
acrid blackman's sweat

blind and terrified
stumbling on hooves not feet
nostrils distended wide
as those of a maddened horse
stampeding a crowded street

i force my eyelids open
find i am following still
the obstinate doctor down
a colossal breathing nave
huge black men and women
dark as a thunderstorm

why aren't they all dressed up
in traditional beads and feathers
why are they all in their best
second-hand white-men's clothes

at the end of the avenue
a ten foot fence steel poles
and glittering diamond mesh

livingstone strides at ease
as if over highveld grass
it's all very well for him
he has a stethoscope
to show to the special branch

but where o where o where
is my permit my passport my pass

i follow their line of sight
i see what holds them there
like stone-age worshippers
at human sacrifice
that damned asthmatic child
how did it get entangled
so brutally in the wire

it hangs there like a wild bird
blown to its twisted doom
in the bright new wire netting
of our sunday tennis court

at the sound of our feet falling
it starts to struggle to hiss

be patient little kaffir
or you'll break your shoulder blades
wait the doctor is coming
the great white wizard from far
he'll place his stethoscope
he'll tap your lungs and heart
a snow-white ambulance
will whisk you away away
to a white bed set apart
and when you come back again
you'll smile with brave defiance
at all your old witchdoctors
all this moody crowd
will be grateful to western science

the mad old doctor's gentle
sunburned hands reach out
unpin the fluttering child

he does not take its pulse
nor tap its heaving chest
he lifts it up sky high
then lowers and kisses it
between its squinting eyes
in the name of the father once
in the name of the son that's twice
in the name of the holy ghost
three times he kisses it gently
there at the foot of our altar
our holy diamond fence

the sun dies in a cloud
there's a terrible tremor of earth

the child sparkles with laughter
a hundred thousand blacks
exclaim with a loud click tixo

and now they begin to sing
and straighten their rounded backs
o shoulders straight heads lifted
singing bass and soprano
what danger is in this joy
this music pouring forever
zambesi of blood and longing
i sing with them with them
smiling i sing i weep
i sing like an idiot
with the singing old explorer
the crowd and the singing boy

what am i doing here
what doing singing here
nkosi sikilele
with a crowd of kaffirs me

the child jumps into my arms

just imagine the stink
if the press gets a photograph
of me in a pose like this

he kisses me wet on the cheek

with all the force i have
i heave i hurl him from me
as if he were a snake

rivers of song dry dead
blindness pours black rain
through which i hear their silence
a high inaudible hiss
far worse than any shout

o let them kill me now
now while i know my whiteness
deep down is still intact

but nothing happens nothing
they leave me to sweat in silence
till i cry for a sound some sound
o any sound to stop me
from finally going mad

it comes at last the sound
as if the child were still
an octopus on my skin
its choked asthmatic breathing
becomes as one with mine

i force my eyelids open

beautiful and clean
pretty as a doll
in a christmas shop at night
with golden hair ensnared
in our ten foot diamond fence
hangs dead my son my son.

Zinc houses, a 'donga's panga gash' with, in places, 'piles of ash and rubbish tips', 'broken bedsteads' and 'rusty roofing strips' are all too familiar. The inhabitants are the compromised, westernised Blacks of our cities, dressed in 'second-hand white men's clothes'. The speaker's guide is David Livingstone, complete with Bible and stethoscope, and the urge to explore this 'new' territory; but all that is new is the

> ten foot fence steel poles
> and glittering diamond mesh,

the white man's emblem of superiority, a monument to separate development. The buffer strip seems doomed to failure. Far from being an area where the two great forces may meet, mingle, and serve as a cushion to hostility, the buffer strip is an area where this meeting has already taken place, and the effects of it are evident everywhere. The speaker's discomfort and repulsion towards his surroundings are manifest in the imagery:

> the sun like scarlet fever
> rolls scalding over the brim.

The donga

> leaks pools of yellow pus
> stitched all around their edges
> with coarse kikuyu grass.

Yet he clings to the White belief that this is 'our new Jerusalem' and avidly searches for signs of peace and prosperity through binoculars. He finds what he interprets as hostility towards himself. A picannin detaches himself from a group at play, faces him

> a catapult in hand
> and pebbles at his feet

The picannin becomes a terrifying David, preparing to slay the guilty white Goliath. The panic-stricken speaker's hand darts his hand to his forehead, crying out with fear. For a moment the roles are reversed: it is the speaker who is Goliath, the Philistine, the crude intruder, come to destroy; the Black man fights with the Lord. This reversal provides a new perspective, strengthening the idea that the speaker has no sympathy for the buffer strip and is in fact experiencing acute discomfort. Ironically, the picannin is an ineffectual warrior:

> he has trouble with his breathing
> hisses hard for air

and the speaker is revealed as a callous coward:

> i giggle with relief.

He does, however, continue to follow 'the obstinate doctor' through

> a colossal breathing nave
> huge black men and women
> dark as a thunderstorm.

Hostility has given way to fear. The speaker realizes he has no right to be there; Livingstone has his stethoscope 'to show to the special branch', but he has nothing:

> where o where o where
> is my permit my passport my pass

Again he is betrayed into a reversal: for a moment he experienc the fear of the Black man caught in a White area without his 'dompas'. Thus, in spite of himself, he reveals his affinity with his surroundings.

At last they reach the end of the avenue where they find'that damned asthmatic child' sacrificially suspended from the ten foot fence. The speaker in his blindness can only compare the sight with that of a bird, blown into the wire netting of their tennis court. The significance of the event escapes him. He can only think and speak like the all-powerful White man:

> be patient little kaffir
> or you'll break your shoulder blades
> wait the doctor is coming
> the great white wizard from far.

Naturally Livingstone's actions surprise him; for the doctor does not treat the child medically, but kisses him in an act of baptism and blessing:

> in the name of the father once
> in the name of the son that's twice
> in the name of the holy ghost.

This act of acceptance only heightens the speaker's feeling of inadequacy.

However, as 'a hundred thousand blacks' break into song, he is taken up for the moment: it seems that the buffer strip has won:

> i sing with them with them
> smiling i sing i weep
> i sing like an idiot

But the phrase 'like an idiot' is a reminder of the White perspective. When the child leaps into the speaker's arms he cannot overcome his repugnance, and the fear of

> ... the stink
> if the press gets a photograph
> of me in a pose like this.

He hurls the child from him, prepared to face the crowd's reaction, hysterically expecting death:

> o let them kill me now
> now while i know my whiteness
> deep down is still intact.

Nothing happens. When next he opens his eyes he sees his own child

> beautiful and clean
> pretty as a doll
> in a christmas shop

hanging from the fence, his hair ensnared in the wire netting. We recognise the grief of King David weeping for Absolom:

> in our ten foot diamond fence
> hangs dead my son my son.

This reversal provides the final ironic perspective. The speaker has fought to deny his own human kinship with those of the buffer strip, but his belonging there has been established beyond doubt. In rejecting the Black child he has rejected his own future. The terrible truth dawns: despite his hostility and his White consciousness, his affinity with the Blacks is real. The fact that he cannot accept it is the poet's indictment of himself and of the White culture. A buffer strip remains nothing more than a dream.

The Butler of this decade's theme is man's isolation; his style is economically stripped of contrivance. The central image from 'Whoever-whatever-you-are' is wholly appropriate

to this theme:

> Perhaps you think I am merely
> a forbidding penal island...

The realization that man exists in isolation is the mainspring of these last poems: the hope that man need not, is their inspiration.

Divison is the theme of one of the finest poems of this period, 'Near Hout Bay'. The poem begins as an anecdote:

> Stopping the car, our childhood friends, now hosts,
> Suggested we stroll to the fabulous view...

Ironically, their attempts at communication only serve to underline their isolation from each other. This inability to communicate is viewed, metaphorically, as a wound:

> talk which, try as we would to make it heal or hide,
> only exposed the gaps, unbandaged sentence by sentence
> the gashes and wounds of time...

This image is drenched in the pain and discomfort of incompleteness. Yet the silence, the 'blessed burial of words' seems less painful. Later, as 'the talk returned...' nothing was attempted; the past is left unexplored. The 'spaces and falls' between them are left unexplored:

> We accepted separation.

They had in fact discovered another form of communication, which in comparison with their talk seemed pointless. The 'ignorant sounds' of nature, falling on 'that primitive silence' are the perfect communication:

> We stood a long time, still, just listening:
> ten thousand sun-struck cicadas ecstatically screaming;
> near and far hundreds of doves in relays
> imperturbably repeating themselves to each other;
> pine wood sighing into the wind from a thousand shimmering needles;
> wind already burdened with the grumbling,
> perpetual, unpitied,
> crumbling of the surf.

The sense-pictures in the excerpt above are more than adornment: each stresses the insight that nature intuitively provides contact through communication: the doves repeat themselves 'to each other'; the wind carries the sound'of the surf'. There is instinctive belonging. This seemingly wordy passage is carefully constructed. Even the sense of togetherness caused by death is short-lived, as is shown in 'A Schoolmaster's Burial Service'. The speaker seems surprised that so many people from so many different walks of life could suddenly be united,

> quite unembarrassed, at one,
> in a cold church, at an odd hour,
> out of the first spring sun.

Death paradoxically is the unifying force; even the deceased's life now has some meaning:

> his life for the first and only time
> seems utterly articulate.

However, something greater and more permanent underlines these activities:

> Before we return to the first spring sunlight
> and the splintering world outside
> unbroken trebles rise like terns above
> and rolling bass of waves that break forever...

The image of the waves suggests the continuity of time; the choir's singing is insubstantial, a fractional interference. Even the man's life was a 'day'. Carefully chosen words, 'splintering' and 'break', emphasise the theme.

The light outside the church will splinter and break the congregation's vision; leaving the building will also signify the end of that moment of togetherness which the motley crowd shared: each will again be himself alone.

Butler's view of man as an isolated being is further apparent in the fact that he often writes about the outcast, or outsider. Even when he writes 'historically' his attraction to those who belong nowhere demands attention. In re-creating part of Ayliff's Journal in verse he chooses to write about Ayliff's visit to a leper colony.[45] It is the suffering that takes place daily that fascinates him. In 'The Divine Underground' he celebrates the victims of the insensitivity of society. In a contemptuous opening, the speaker dismisses those who suffer publicly, affording the media the spectacle of their pain:

> Souls in _flagrante delicto_ or _in extremis_
> stretched on the rack or Cleopatra's bed,
> you have no news for me.

He recognises in the victims of the everyday tragedy the true heroes. They wear 'a habit of discipline on every gesture'. They are isolated from society:

> in the cold, in the shade,
> like lepers, like untouchables.

They have earned a divine wisdom, setting them apart from the rest of humanity. Like the purged Lear and Cordelia, they have gained much through experience; 'like God's spies' they tolerate our pettiness.

Butler's consciousness of the 'great spaces and falls/between us all' is not limited to division between individuals, as is evident in 'Dream of a Buffer Strip'. He is doubtless one of the poets he himself depicts in a lecture delivered at a Summer School at the University of Cape Town:

45) J. Hinchliff, (Editor) _The Journal of John Ayliff 1821-1830_, Cape Town, Balkema, 1971.

> ...those whose intellects and consciences are nailed to a belief that we must do something about social injustice in our poems. 46

This last period yields a handful of political poems. The worst of these is as bad as 'The Underdogs', and has the same weaknesses. 'Profligate Parson' is a bitter attack on apartheid, on the Immorality Act in particular. A 'White Man of God' who has been caught 'in the act' with 'a daughter of Ham' points an accusing finger at the law, exposing 'our holy sham':

> 'With neighbours, whom
> (to please the State)
> we fail to love
> as Light commands,
> Darkness dooms us
> to fornicate.'

This is little more than a complaint, a protest song. It sheds no light on the problem, offers no new perspective. It is solely a vehicle for Butler's criticism. Such bitterness in not characteristic of Butler. His political verse is more often saved from this fate by his innate compassion and indefatigable optimism. It is this mood that lightens the forbidding lines of 'Soweto', Butler's comment on the Black townships riots of 1977. Contrary to the pattern at this time, 'Soweto' is written in five strictly rhymed eight line stanzas, possibly in an attempt to contain the speaker's emotion. Panic and fear do, however, escape in lines such as these:

> Nowhere
> Escape; still safe in my skin I turn
> To sniff, like a thin stray dog, the air.
> Where, where today do the schoolrooms burn?

Despair is not allowed to triumph:

> Dear Law-makers, dear Law-breakers, may it please
> The Gods to give us the needful insights and graces.

The death of the Bishop of Johannesburg's son gives rise to

46) G. Butler "On Being Present Where You Are: Some Observation on South African Poetry, 1930-1960," Wilhelm,P. and Polley, J.: Poetry South Africa,(Johannesburg, Donker, 1976), p100.

another political poem, 'In Memoriam, J.A.R., Drowned, East London.' The telling of the story of the boy's drowning is interpolated with cynical comments typical of the man-in-the-street:

> This brilliant boy was stupidly drowned
> while his parents watched from the beach,
> his special body was never recovered
> from the indiscriminate sea.
>
> Shrug your shoulders, sigh, say
> accidents will happen; try
> a little compassionate speech;
> It's hardest on those who have to stay.

Public indifference to the tragedy is contrasted with the speaker's grief. He was no ordinary boy:

> This boy was here on holiday
> from Cambridge, where they say
> he disciplined his tongue
> to most incisive acts of prayer
>
> in agony for us here
> where light after light is dowsed...

But:

> What on earth has this to do
> with this butterfly-brilliant holiday crowd
> drowsing near-naked in salty sand?

This double perspective creates tension, giving the speaker something to oppose and reason against. Whether we like it or not, this boy and his friend did 'intercede for his and our land', holding this 'landscape of separate beaches' up to the 'indiscriminate light of heaven'. This is the thought that moves the speaker. Again it is hopefulness that informs the concluding stanza, as he pleads that the boy

> continue to lift our drowning forgetfulness up,
> teach us to look twice at every sea,
> to discipline our speech,
> to cry, to pray
> incisively.

The eight haiku under the title 'Homeland Haiku' are the least hopeful of the political poems of this period. Yet even these are instilled with a quiet resignation to the fact of de-tribalisation. The least successful are those in which the theme is too explicitly voiced:

> White men's aeroplanes
> bring bread-money from fathers
> black moles underground.

Simplicity and subtlety are features of the most successful:

> His one blanket's red
> turns brown, clings closer
> as the embers die.

Butler's subject is still the question of belonging. The poems of this period state clearly that man does not belong, at least, not with other men; but they state even more clearly the hope that he might. Butler may recognise the 'terrors/ and hates', he may acknowledge the fact that 'few eyes/ can see beyond/ this tragic time's/complexities'; but his will to love and spread love always finds the good:

> Through rotting days
> beaten, broken,
> some stayed pure;
> others learned how
> to grin and endure,
> and here and there
> a heart stayed warm,
> a head grew clear.

CONCLUSION

In an article in the PN Review of October 1979, David Wright pays tribute to Guy Butler as 'the first wholly South African poet writing in English'.[46] He mentions Campbell, Plomer and F.T.Prince as examples of poets who did not stay and who 'count at best as South African exiles';[47] Butler is 'the first to stick it out at home'.[48] Wright's observation is both accurate and valid: Guy Butler was born in South Africa, and still resides here; he did ultimately find it possible to write about South Africa and Africa in an uncompromising manner. What Wright's statement does not reveal is the poet's struggle, his constant self-examination that stretched over two decades before he arrived at a point where the publication of a volume such as South of the Zambezi was possible.

Butler's search for an indigenous identity is inseparably linked with his search for an artistic idiom. Born of Settler stock, he was ever conscious of belonging to a minority group, the English-speaking South African; a group which, more than a century after its arrival in this country, was still fulfilling the purpose for which it had originally been placed here: that of acting as a buffer between the Afrikaner and the African. Butler inherited the European literary tradition. His early models were Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley; during the war, Owen; later, Yeats and Eliot; always Shakespeare. But he became gradually more aware, especially after the war, of a very different cultural and linguistic heritage: Africa. Of

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46) David Wright:'A South African Poet:Notes on Guy Butler,' in the PN Review, Vol 6 No 1,(October 1979),p 44.

47) Ibid. p 44

48) Ibid. p 44

this heritage very few models existed. Plomer only occasionally finds himself en rapport with Africa . Campbell, Currey and Prince left South Africa. Butler was still a young man at school when the thought of leaving South Africa occurred to him:

> I felt I wanted to paint or to write. And as far as I knew from my limited experience of South African literature and painting up to that time, very few had tried to do these things in South Africa. There was, of course, the case of Olive Schreiner, right on my doorstep. But the attitude to her was equivocal: a difficult freak of a woman to whom it was proper on occasions to doff one's moral or patriotic hat.
>
> I felt that I must leave the Union, as Roy Campbell had done; get into an old society, where frontiers and civil wars were things of the past; where the landscape bears beautiful cities, centuries old; where princes have left magnificent gardens, green, with flashing fountains and honey-coloured statues; countries whose air has been breathed by long dynasties of artists. 49

This consciousness of the limitations of Africa, and a deeply felt sense of belonging to Europe assert themselves as a tension in Butler's early verse. In 'Karroo Town 1939' he polarises the conflicting forces, the European intrusion on an African landscape, without identifying with either.

The effect of the war on Butler is recorded in his war poems. In a large number of these the emphasis has shifted from the tension between Europe and Africa to a conflict between the alienating experience of war and the emotionally comforting memory of home, a South African home. But the war did bring about removal from South Africa:

> This immersion of many thousands of impressionable South Africans in North Africa, Italy and the U.K. did something to the consciousness of English-speaking South Africa. It was a spell of exile, ranging from a few months to six years - but an exile with a difference: exile in the continent of our own origins, and in some cases, the home of our parents... 50

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49) Karoo Morning, pp263-264.

50) Guy Butler:'On Being Present Where You Are: Some Observations on South African Poetry, 1930-1960', in Poetry South Africa, edited by P. Wilhelm and J. Polley, (Donker, Johannesburg, 1976), p 90.

This realization found its way into later war poems, notably 'Stranger To Europe' and 'On First Seeing Florence'.

Yet he was content to return to South Africa; in fact, he did not want 'to live anywhere else in the vast Anglo-Saxon world'.[51] He returned full of hope:

> We were prepared to be world citizens all right, and returned to South Africa hoping that our country would gradually move into a climate of mutual racial tolerance and social justice within a strong and enlightened Commonwealth...We were all set for careers devoted to the not incompatible ideals of world peace and general African enlightenment. Such was the euphoria -... (We were) waiting for the United Party to start introducing some really significant measures to improve African housing and education.[52]

The poems of this period do not reflect this optimism. 'After Ten Years' is a cynical view of life, filled with a despair born of both the war and the hopelessness of the South African situation. The 'protracted nausea of disillusionment in the years that followed the 1948 election'[53] is captured in political protest poems, such as 'The Underdogs' and 'Sundowner':

> The result was that, within a decade, we felt like exiles in our own country. Many of us still do.[54]

Butler was clearly not yet wholly South African. The tension brought about by this state of 'double exile'[55] appears as a dichotomy in the poems of the fifties. In 'Livingstone Crosses Africa', 'Home Thoughts', 'Bronze Heads', and 'Myths' Butler strove to reconcile the cultures of Europe and Africa, or, in his own idiom, to effect a marriage of Apollo and Dionysus, and thus to resolve his identity problem. These poems are philosophic treatises, written in the intellectual, symbolic, and disciplined style associated with Apollo and Europe, but expressing a longing to confront the emotional, naturalistic, and savage Dionysus and Africa:

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51) Ibid. p 91
52) Ibid. p 91
53) Ibid. p 91
54) Ibid. p 91
55) Ibid. p 92

> O African creatures, across this night
> I glimpse in our primitive storm
> Of thunder, whirlwind, mitage-twisted light
> A lifted limb or glance
> Which I might free, give consciousness and form
> Dared I but stare into your furious dance! 56

Butler would not remain caught in the middle for much longer. Poems written in the late fifties show a readiness to 'stare into (Africa's) furious dance'. 'Tourist Insight Into Things' and 'Isibongo of Matiwane' look unflinchingly at Dionysus, and celebrate what they see in an emotional, naturalistic idiom. The publication of 'Sweet-water' in 1963 indicates the resolution of the tension between Europe and Africa, and the climax of a development towards an indigenous identity.

A fact that arises from the above is that Butler's verse reveals a consciousness of historical event, which gives it an autobiographical nature. Butler records and interprets experience. Experience does not only mean what he did, or what happened to him, but more importantly the constant interaction between the man and his changing environment. Butler's interpretation of his experience always relates to the past and the future: he is time or history orientated. Butler recognised this fact, and clearly regarded it as a failing. In contrasting his and his contemporaries' work with that of younger South African poets, Sidney Clouts and Anne Welsh in particular, he found in the latter group a 'spatial consciousness' which he calls ' a rare and blessed thing':

> This kind of spatial consciousness is a rare and blessed thing. If I might underline this by a personal remark. Looking down on Florence in 1944 I saw the city in pure space, as it were beyond Time. My own Time orientation did not allow it to rest at that, and I spent some twenty odd years trying to spell out the significance of those few visionary minutes in a complex sequence of poems.
> Now Sidney Clouts would never do a silly thing like that. 57

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56) From 'Home Thoughts'.

57) Guy Butler: 'On Being Present Where You Are', p98.

Butler spent his life 'trying to spell out the significance' of his experiences in his poems, and he is partly correct in assuming this to be a weakness for it doubtless accounts for the explanatory character of much of his work. But this attitude to art is more than a personal foible. The full explanation is far more deeply rooted. In order to discover it this thesis needs to return to where it began: the question of belonging.

Butler is a folk poet. His role as poet is inextricably bound up with his role as spokesman for the group to which he belongs. The English-speaking South African has the benefit of his example: Butler writes in order to explain his people's predicament, to remind them of the past, and to hint at a harmonious future. The buffer-group must dissolve in both directions: this is the vision. The reality is the isolation he describes. But it is in the work of the visionary that we detect 'a dominant and unifying note of caring'.[58] It is the vision that gives Butler's verse its historical orientation, and prophetic quality.

Guy Butler serves his people by means of his art: itself 'a rare and blessed thing'.

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58) Ruth Harnett in the Foreword to Songs and Ballads, p 1.

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